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super-heroine Regina pursues
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of kooks, corpses, and nudes

The Spy Who Came In from the Copa

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THE WILD, WILD WEAPON

Randy Kidd did a double-take. "Did you say hooray?"

"Don't act so innocent, Kidd," the CIA man snapped. "Every secret agent in the world would give his green stamps for information on the Hu Ray—Professor Hu's depolymerizing ray machine."

"It kills people?" Randy blinked.

"No. Dissolves rubber," Regina explained. "Also polyethylene and most plastics. I read a lot."

"That's it," the CIA man sighed. "Can you imagine what would happen to the U.S. armed forces if somebody started blasting with an invisible ray that melted rubber tires, tank treads, and . . . good God, *pencil erasers?*"

"Nylons," Regina added. "Panties, bras, girdles . . ."

DAGMAR ...
The Spy Who Came In from the Copa

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THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COPA

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Chapter ONE

"GOD DAMN IT!" said the Blue Queen to the minister. "Take your hand off my knee!"

The skinny little man in clerical garb was seated next to the Blue Queen on the evening flight from Bahia to Rio de Janeiro. The plane was an antiquated prop job left over from World War II and, at first, the Blue Queen thought the little minister had not heard her. Turning to fix him with a withering glance, she found him already somewhat withered. His head was thrown back against the pillow and he looked as if he'd dozed off. But his hand was still resting in a place it had no right to rest —a place the Blue Queen called, euphemistically, her "knee," since she was too much a lady to describe his lewd grab realistically.

She repeated her dainty remark, in a manner which shall not sully the pages of this family-type book, and, when the man in the clerical collar still failed to respond or take his hand away, picked up his limp wrist in the disgusted manner of one picking up a used contraceptive and tossed it over the arm-rest to its owner. The man in clerical garb did not thank her. He waited until the plane hit another bump in the sky and slumped sideways against her, his head resting coyly on the Blue Queen's shoulder.

"Trouble, Regina?" asked a sardonic male voice from across the aisle. The voice belonged to Randy Kidd, a tall, good-looking, rather dilettantish type who doubled in brass as the Blue Queen's manager, pianist, sidekick, and all-around Man Friday. He asked the question in a casual tone, but his eyes were narrowed as he eyed the

odd behavior of Regina's seat companion. At least, odd behavior for a minister. Regina, Star of Stage, Screen, and Television (when she wasn't dabbling in free-lance espionage), was a blue-eyed blonde bombshell who attracted men the way honey attracts flies, but . . . a *minister?*

"The old sleepy-creepy bit," Regina muttered, shrugging her shapely shoulders. Since one of them was, at the moment, the little man's sole visible means of support, his head slid off it and slowly, like a raindrop running down a windowpane, started sliding down the front of Regina's blue satin suit. Since neither the suit nor Regina was nearly as flat as a windowpane, it was a round trip. The minister's head finished its vertical roller-coaster ride to wind up in the same place his hand had been. Nose down.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Reverend honey," Regina muttered dryly, as she grabbed his scrawny neck and started to push his head off her lap. Then she suddenly stiffened and took a closer look at the man in clerical garb.

"*That* does it!" Randy Kidd was saying, getting to his feet and looming over Regina and her wolfish-looking fellow traveler. But Regina held up a hand and said, "Randy, get the stewardess."

"What for, doll? I can handle this creep."

"Somebody already has," Regina sighed. "He's dead."

Without answering, Randy put a hand against the man's neck to feel for a pulse. There wasn't any. He nodded and said, "Over and out. I'll see about finding a better place to stash him."

Since they were seated in the rear section of the plane (Tip to travelers, always sit in the tail. You'll get airsick faster but live longer if she plows in.), Randy started for the nose, shrugging off the questions put to him by other passengers as he passed. At least, he shrugged off most of them.

"What happened back there?" asked a redhead in a low-cut shantung sheath that must have cost her a mint,

unless she'd dyed the hair to match the dress, shoes, and handbag that same startling shade of subdued fire-engine.

"I'll tell you what happened, doll," Randy answered, leaning over to stare down the front of the dress, "if you'll tell me a few things. Like, your name."

"I'm Passion Flowers," the girl answered, with a roguish smile as she ran her eyes up and down Randy's tropical worsted.

"Sounds like a stripper," Randy grinned.

"I am a go-go girl," Passion Flowers answered huskily. "I'm booked into Dirty Dick's Discotheque in Rio."

"Small world!" Randy laughed. "*I'm* booked in there too! I play the piano for Regina."

"*The* Regina, Star of Stage Screen and Television?"

"There's only one Regina, doll. As for me, Randy Kidd's the name. Playing piano is my game."

"I *like* men who play games," Passion Flowers husked. "The games *I* like to play, I mean." She lowered her lids, stared hungrily at Randy, and licked her lips with a little sliver of pink tongue.

Before Randy could go further into Passion Flowers' views on fun and games, a voice called, "Randy, *dear!*" a trifle impatiently. Randy patted Passion Flowers on her bare shoulder and split. There was another chick worth stopping to chat with, a honey-blonde with an astounding lung capacity; but, since Regina might find it difficult to get out of the seat once rigor mortis set in, Randy sighed, "You can't win 'em all," and kept going.

He went as far forward as he could without finding the stewardess. A little gray door ahead of the john said "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY" in large black letters. Randy shrugged and pushed the door. It was locked. He pounded on it for a while and, getting no response, shoved a sliver of celluloid he carried for such emergencies between the jamb and the latch. The door clicked and flew open.

The stewardess was in the small lounge set aside for

the crew. On the couch. She was not alone. The man on the couch with her was either the pilot or the co-pilot. It was hard to tell, since he wasn't wearing his uniform, or anything else. Neither was the stewardess.

"For chrissake, can't you read?" the man shouted, stopping what he was doing as the stewardess gleeped and turned beet-red from head to toe.

"Always wondered if those stories about the Mile-High Club were true," Randy smiled. "I'm sorry to bother you while you're having so much fun, but we've got a dead man on board."

The man, fumbling for his pants on a nearby hook, muttered, "That's no reason to come busting in on a man when he's . . . Did you say a *dead* man?"

"Very dead," Randy nodded. "So, if you kiddies would finish tearing off what you were tearing off when I so rudely interrupted, I'd be much obliged if you'd take him off our hands. Or, I should say, Regina's lap."

He stepped outside, closing the door behind him. But not soon enough to miss the stewardess saying, "Honestly, Clyde; somehow I'm just not in the *mood* any more."

It was raining in Rio de Janeiro. A tropical torrent that lashed down on Rio's glittering spiderweb of lights from its dirty wool blanket of low-hanging clouds.

The plane came in flying Chinese (Won Wing Lo) to miss the looming brown peak of The Sugarloaf by twice the length of Passion Flowers' false lashes and was met at the airport by an ambulance for the dead man the pilot had radioed ahead about (after putting his clothes back on) and a fusillade of fuzz who wanted to know more about the lady who'd held his hand while he died.

In addition to the usual Brazilian customs officials, there was a trio of CIA men from the U.S. Consulate, and a man who looked like a younger version of Caesar Romero and said he was Lieutenant Pao DePussa of the Municipal Police. With him was a little man in a trenchcoat who

kept writing things in a little black book and a morose individual introduced as Senhor I.C. Hands and claiming to be a member of British Intelligence. Regina wondered, at first, why British Intelligence was interested in the death of a man carrying an American passport, on an American-owned plane, over Brazil.

The interview was being conducted in a smallish room in the back of the customs shed. The rain beat a steady drum-roll on the corrugated iron roof and added, somehow, to the general gloom as Lieutenant DePussa, his face worried, handed her passport back to her and sighed, "Ees not enough we have theese accursed cloudburst to spoil the Mardi Gras. Ees not enough we have every treeky porson sous of the Tropic of Cancer coming here to fleece the toureests. *Now* we most cope weeth the Blue Queen and her (shudder) nefarious henchman, Randy Keed!"

"We heard what the two of you did in Los Perros in the last book," one of the CIA men growled.

"Well," Regina shrugged, "you can't blame a li'l old girl if she wants to save the world once in a while, can you?"

"Okay. Okay. So you kept Professor Fang, Arch Fiend of the Universe, from wiping out the entire human race in a fit of pique. But, for chrissake, Regina, did you have to blow the whole place off the map to do it?"

"We only blew up the harbor," Regina sniffed. "Besides, it wasn't *our* idea. A certain British agent swam under this yacht loaded with Soviet ammunition with an explosive cocktail-shaker and . . ."

"We know all about that," I.C. Hands cut in. "What we'd like to know at the moment, however, is where we can find Murgatroid Schnook."

"Murgatroid *who?*"

"Schnook. The man Fallingham was supposed to contact here in Rio."

"I'll bite," Randy sighed. "Who in the hell is Fallingham?"

"The man who died on the plane."

"His name was Quivly," Randy objected. "Reverend Silas Barnaby Quivly, of the Thrice Redeemed Church of Boston. I took the liberty of peeking at his passport."

The British agent exchanged looks with the leader of the CIA detachment, shrugged, and said, "I suppose you didn't *know* he was J. Farquart Fallingham, On Her Majesty's Service?"

"Nope. Honest Injun, buddy, we're down here to play a club date at Dirty Dick's Discotheque. Songs, witty patter, etcetera."

"It's the etcetera that worries us," another agent cut in. "We know you must be working for *some* intelligence agency. That's why they call Regina, here, the Blue Queen."

"Wot *ees* thees Blue Queen theeng?" the police lieutenant cut in.

I.C. Hands sniffed as he shot DePussa a look usually reserved for retarded children as he asked, "Do you play chess?"

"A leetle."

"I dare say. Have you ever heard of a game called Fairy Chess?"

"*Señor!* I assure you, despite my appearance, that I am perfectly normal!"

"No offense, Lieutenant," I.C. Hands soothed. "I mean the kind of fairies one finds in the bottom of one's garden. Not the other kind."

"Joost because a man used a leetle cologne . . ." Pao DePussa muttered. Then he brightened and exclaimed, "Ah, you mean fairies like on the mushrooms?"

"Yes. To get on with it, if you don't mind, Fairy Chess was the invention of a chessmaster who, getting bored with the usual game, decided to complicate it. In *most* chess games, there are only two queens. A red one and a white one. In the more complicated version, there's a *third* queen in the game. A *blue* one."

"A blue queen, Senhor? But wheech side does *she* play on?"

"That's a good question," answered I.C. Hands with a sardonic glance at Regina as the latter, with an expression of utter innocence, blew smoke rings from the cigarette she smoked through a long silver holder. Seeing he wasn't going to get a rise out of the poised Regina, I.C. Hands turned back to Pao DePussa and said, "The blue queen is dropped down in the center of the board at the start of the game. She can be used, in turn, by either player. Since neither has complete control of her actions, the blue queen becomes the most dangerous piece on the board!"

"Ah? Then, theese blue queen has been known to play on *both sides?*"

"And *against* both sides, when the stakes were high enough." I.C. Hands nodded, accusingly, with another glance in Regina's direction.

The latter blew another ring and asked, thoughtfully, "Lieutenant honey, are we under arrest?"

"We joost weesh to know wot you can tell us about Senhor Fallingham's mysterious death, Senhorita Regina."

"Well, Lieutenant lover, we've told you. I mean, he was all right when he got on the plane at Bahia. Of course, that was before we had supper. It was chicken a la king. Do you think *that* could have killed him? Chicken a la king usually kills *me.*"

"The body has been taken to Botafogo Hospital for an autopsy, Senhorita," DePussa answered. "We weel know, soon, joost how he was murdered."

"Meanwhile," I.C. Hands chimed in, "there's the matter of Murgatroid Schnook and the Hu Ray."

"Yes," nodded Randy Kidd, soberly. "What ever happened to old Murgatroid and his . . . Did you say hooray?"

"Don't act so innocent, Mister Kidd," a CIA man

snapped. "You know as well as I that every secret agent in the world would give his green stamps for information on Professor Hu's depolymerizing ray machine."

"Oh lord!" groaned Randy. "Not *another* crazy Chinese scientist with a plan to destroy mankind!"

"Hu was Vietnamese," I.C. Hands snorted. "And he's hardly in a position to destroy anyone. Since he's very very *dead* at the moment."

"The V.C. got him," a CIA man explained. "He was working on his gizmo for the U.S. Army in Saigon and somebody threw a plastique through his window. Blew Hu to hell and gone."

"Then why," asked Regina in sudden interest, "are you so worried about this Professor Hu, honeys? If he's dead, I mean."

"Hu's gone, but his ray, or the way you put the damned thing together, is still in existence. You see, Professor Hu had a daughter. Her name was Una."

"Una Hu?"

"Right. Her mother was French. Una Hu vanished after the blast. We thought, at first, she'd gone up in smoke with her father. We knew Una Hu was working with him and there were a lot of pieces left for such a skinny little guy. But British Intelligence reports from Hong Kong indicated that Una Hu was traveling in the company of Murgatroid Schnook, a former British agent cashiered a few years back for drunkenness and over padding his expense account. At first we thought they'd defected to the Chinese Reds, and you can bet your bird there were worried looks around the Pentagon when *that* news came over the wire!"

"Lord yes!" added another. "If the Chinooms came into the war with the Hu Ray, we'd be in big trouble."

"Kills people, eh?" Randy grunted.

The leader of the CIA detachment exchanged glances with I.C. Hands. Then the latter shrugged and said, "Don't play innocent with us, Mister Kidd. You know as well as I do what the depolymerizer ray does!"

"Dissolves rubber," Regina explained. "Also polyethylene and most plastics. I read a lot."

"You must!" Randy marveled. "You can tell what it does just from the name doll?"

"Of course. Rubber, polyethylene, nylon, and so on, are in a class of chemicals called polymers. They stretch because their molecules are linked together in long chains. I imagine Professor Hu's ray somehow *breaks* the links and lets the rubber, or other plastic, fall apart."

"That's about the size of it," a CIA man sighed in a worried tone. "Can you imagine what would happen to the U.S. armed forces, or any other, for that matter, if somebody started blasting with an invisible, inaudible, secret ray that melted all its rubber tires, tank treads, and . . . good God, *pencil erasers?*"

"To say nothing of what they could do if they turned it on in an American *city!*" Regina frowned. "Nylons melting right off the girls' legs and . . . Most panties, bras, girdles, and a lot of *dresses* are made of polymer plastics! Gleep!"

"All them dames running around naked," grinned Randy Kidd. Then his face sobered as he thought further and gasped. "But all my tires would be flat, contraceptive devices would melt right on . . . Good God, Regina! This could mean the end of the American Way of Life!"

Chapter TWO

"Man, dig this psychedelic sidewalk!" said Randy Kidd as he helped Regina out of the taxi in front of Dirty Dick's Discotheque. The mosaic pavement along the Avenida Rio Branco, like most of the main streets in Rio, had been paved with small bits of black basalt and white limestone in a drunken zebra-stripe pattern. Regina, remembering something she'd read in a guidebook, said, "They call that Brazilian Baroque, Randy. Most of the main streets in Rio were laid out during the rubber boom."

"I didn't know you could take a trip on rubber," Randy marveled. "I mean, the LSD-type trip. I've heard of smoking bananas but . . . rubber? Ech!"

"Silly; they didn't *smoke* rubber in those days. They made *money* off it. Brazil used to be the world's biggest rubber producer, before they ran into competition from British and French plantations in Malaya and . . ." Her voice trailed off and she blinked at Randy to gasp, "French Indo-China!"

"What's so special about French Indo-China? Didn't the French lose it, a few years ago?"

"Yes. And it turned into Laos, Cambodia, and *Viet Nam!*"

"Oh oh," Randy frowned. "You think there's some connection?"

"Perhaps. Professor Hu was working on a rubber-destroying ray in a rubber-producing country, and now his daughter's supposed to be here in Brazil. Another rubber-producing country."

"So what? Most folks use synthetics, nowadays, anyhow."

"But, Randy darlin', what if all the synthetic rubber started falling apart all of a sudden? Can't you just see the advertising commercials?"

"Yeah. Like that cat in the straw sombrero selling coffee on TV. Only this cat would be pushing Genuine Brazilian Rubber!"

"There are a few holes in the theory," Regina admitted. "The Hu Ray, as far as we know, melts *all* polymers."

"As far as we *know*," agreed Randy, pushing open the door of Dirty Dick's Discotheque. "But suppose the Hu Ray can be made selective? Suppose you can beam it in on one particular substance?"

"Somebody could make a lot of loot," Regina mused, leading the way into the deserted club. "More money than the Chincoms pay, anyway. And they say this Murgatroid Schnook was tossed out of Her Majesty's Service for overexpensive tastes."

And then they couldn't discuss it further because there were two men within earshot. One was a Negro wearing a white dinner jacket and a worried expression. He was seated at the deserted bar with another man—a man in crumpled white linens who'd buried his face in his arms atop the mahogany bar. The Negro smiled wanly at Regina and Randy as they approached and said, "Sorry, folks, the place is still closed."

"We've come to help you open it," Randy smiled. "This is Regina, Star Of Stage Screen and Television. I'm Randy Kidd, her partner. We're looking for Dirty Dick, the cat who booked us into this joint."

"This heah's Mistah Dick," the Negro sighed, adding, in a lower tone, "He's like bombed."

"Tom," the man resting his head on the bar said in a muffled sob. "Play it again, Tom."

"Play what again, Mistah Dick?" Tom answered defensively.

"You know the song I wanna hear, dammit!" the man sobbed, raising his head to stare at the other with bloodshot eyes. The same bloodshot eyes fastened on Regina and brightened momentarily before lapsing back into sullen dull pain as he lisped, "You ain't her. You're a nice-lookin' dish, lady. But you ain't . . . her."

"Did anyone ever tell you," Randy asked, "that you look just like Humphrey Bogart?"

"Are you lookin' for a fat lip, buddy?" Dirty Dick growled, starting to rise. "I *am* Humphrey Bogart!"

And then he swayed, passed a hand over his brow, and muttered, "Play it *again*, Tom!" before falling forward on his face and passing out cold.

"He shouldn't ought to drink so much," Tom sighed, stepping over Dirty Dick to the upright piano near the bar. He sat down, and, as his hands idly played *As Time Goes By*, he explained.

"Mistah Dick think's he Ol' Humphrey Bogart when he's been on the sauce too long, Miss Regina. Keeps expectin' Miss Ingrid Bergman to come boppin' in on him while I's in the middle of this heah song. She ain't nevah done it, so fah, but that don't stop Ol' Mistah Dick. He just keeps a-drinkin' and a-hopin' and I jest keeps playin' this heah cotton-pickin' piano. Like, it's a livin'."

"I thought the decor in this place looked familiar!" smiled Regina, glancing around at the white-stuccoed Moorish archways and beaded curtains. "It's the set from *Casablanca*, isn't it?"

"Mistah Dick had it made, special. Used to call it Dick's American Bar. Only this discotheque jazz started up and, when he's sober, Mistah Dick's got a head fo' business. You'all will find your dressin' rooms ready fo' you'all. Go back of the podium and past the greenroom and you'all has the second and third rooms on the right. You is the one with the star on her door, Miss Regina."

He chuckled wryly to himself as he tinkled the piano and added, "Had us a little trouble with that star. Mistah Dick said it was fo' you, Miss Regina. Only this heah

stripper raised cain about it a while ago. Came stormin' out heah to give Mistah Dick what fo' fo' not puttin' no star on *her* door!"

"Was it Miss Passion Flowers, Tom?" Randy asked. "Redhead with a nice pair of lungs?"

"Nothin' wrong with the lady's lungs," Tom laughed. "Do-Jesus! I bet they heard her all the way to Ipanema, the way she carried on. Ol' Mistah Dick didn't pay her no mind. 'Cept to tell her she didn't look like Ingrid Bergman either. Only, she didn't have no red hair. She was a blonde, like Miss Regina, heah. Only redhead we got on the bill came in a while later. I think she *did* say her name was Flowers." He thought a bit while he went on playing. Then he nodded and said, "Miss Ville was the gal what made all the fuss about her billin'. That was it, Miss Voddie Ville."

"I'm probably going to have trouble with her." Regina sighed. Then she turned to Randy and said, "May as well get it over with. Did you have the bags sent here, Randy, or to the hotel?"

"Both," Kidd answered. "Your theatrical kit's on its way here right now. The other stuff's supposed to go to the hotel."

"I'd like some of the other stuff here, Randy honey," Regina murmured, shooting her sidekick a glance that Tom, at the piano, could not see. He knew what she meant. They'd actually come to Rio for a legitimate club date, the espionage business having fallen off, lately, due to the publicity Regina was getting. It was publicity she didn't want, about her clandestine career as the Blue Queen. Now, since they seemed to have stumbled into another caper, she'd need more than her gowns and makeup. Randy had his own moonlighting equipment to think about, too. Like the cut down P-38 he carried, on his other job, in a spring holster under a specially tailored jacket.

"Want the makeup kit?" he muttered as they passed out of Tom's earshot. The item he referred to was

actually a well-equipped chemistry lab disguised as a makeup kit, with the chemicals in cosmetic containers, perfume bottles that doubled in brass as test tubes, and a large bottle of what seemed to be spray cologne until one turned on the bunsen burner inside.

"May as well leave it where it is, for now," Regina answered. "At least, until we know how our security is in this place. I don't have to tell you, of course, that our rooms might be bugged?"

"Doubt it," Randy objected. "They haven't had time. But it pays to be careful. Here's your pad, honey. Star on the door and all."

"But it's the fourth door on the right," Regina frowned. "Didn't Tom say mine was the third?"

"So he can't count." Randy shrugged, opening the door and switching on the light.

Then he stopped breathing and stood very very still.

The blonde lay spreadeagled on the floor of the dressing room. Naked, except for the black mesh stocking someone had wrapped around her shapely neck. Miss Voddie Ville might have been pretty, if she hadn't been sticking her swollen tongue out. The face was swollen, too. Swollen and purple. The knotted mesh stocking around her neck had a lot to do with that. Voddie Ville had been thoroughly strangled by someone who knew his business.

"Well, she's not going to give you any trouble now." Randy sighed, wishing he'd had a chance to get better acquainted with that shapely corpse before it had become one. "At least," he added, "she won't make any trouble about the star."

"She already has," Regina objected. "For herself. You see, there's a nail hole in the next door down the hall. The third room. The one Dirty Dick assigned to me with a star on its door."

"You mean she *moved* it?"

"Of course. The silly little thing was making like a prima donna, and it only takes a minute to pry a gilt ply-

wood star from one door and nail it to another. Of course, Voddie had no way of knowing I'd been delayed at the airport. Neither had the killer. He came here, tonight, looking for a blonde with a star on her dressing-room door and . . . he found her."

"But if she hadn't changed things around, Regina, the star would have been on *your* door!"

"Exactly."

"You mean, the killer came to kill *you*?"

"Of course," Regina nodded, glancing down at the strangled stripper. "Did a good job of it, too. I hope he won't be too disappointed when he finds out he killed the wrong girl."

"I hope," Randy murmured, "he doesn't get a chance to correct his mistake."

"That," Regina sighed, "makes two of us."

Chapter THREE

"WHAT I would like to know," Pio DePussa was saying, "ees who keeled Voddie Ville?"

"Talking pictures?" offered Randy.

Nobody laughed.

Regina, Randy, Passion Flowers, Dirty Dick, his pal, Tom, and a hunchbacked old doorman called "Pop" were seated in a row in the greenroom of Dirty Dick's Discotheque. It wasn't green, by the way. The walls were off-white stucco and the rug was sort of octopus-puke chartreuse, but it was still called the greenroom because greenrooms always are. Hovering over the six were Lieutenant DePussa, his pencil-pushing helper, I.C. Hands, and one of the CIA men. Regina wondered, idly, where the others were.

"As you know," Lieutenant DePussa said, in a puzzled tone, "the autopsy report from Botafogo Hospital says Senhor Fallingham died of natural causes. That, of course, is the only reason we allowed you, Miss Regina, to continue to your destination." He paused and added, ominously, "However, there ees no doubt about the death of Senhorita Voddie Ville. She was strangled."

"Don't look at us, Lieutenant sugar," Regina answered. "Randy-wandy and li'l ol' me were with you'all at the airport. Remember?"

"She had been dead for some time by the time you arrived," the detective conceded, grudgingly. "But I steel theenk you know more than you are weeling to say, eh?" He turned to Dirty Dick and asked, "And you, Senhor Deek? Can you account for yourself?"

"I was bombed outta my mind." The man who looked

like Bogie shrugged. "And I was with Tom, here, all the time."

"An' I was with Mistah Dick," Tom agreed.

"He kept playing that same damned tune over and over again on the piano out front," put in Passion Flowers. "He damn near drove me out of my skull. But I can certainly promise you he was never away from the piano stool for more than a few moments at a time."

"Oh? And where were *you*, Senhorita Flowers?"

"Why, right back here. I mean, in my dressing room. The one next to the room Voddie Ville was killed in. But, I swear, I never laid eyes on her. Honest, you can ask anyone. I've never played the same house with Voddie."

"Eet was a man who keeled her," DePussa shrugged. "At least we know that much."

"How?" Randy asked.

"By the way she was keeled," the lieutenant answered. "She was strangled by someone so strong eet broke her neck and almost cot her head off!" He bowed, gallantly, to Passion Flowers and added, "And so, although Senhorita Flowers has no alibi, she obviously could not have done so, eh?"

"I did hear what sounded like a man's voice, before," Passion Flowers said, blushing prettily up at the lieutenant.

Pao DePussa frowned thoughtfully and asked what the man had said. But Passion explained she hadn't heard. "It was just a deep rumble," she said. "I didn't listen. I thought, at the time, it was Pop, here."

"Ahah? And you, Senhor . . . Pop?"

"Pop's the name, opening doors is my game," croaked the ancient hunchback. "Actually, my full name is Roger Twillingsworth Weezle. But my friends call me Pop. Pop Weezle."

"You have not answered my question, Senhor Pop."

"You mean, where I was when somebody killed Voddie Ville? Shux, I wasn't here yet. I was still at home. Got a furnished room over near Sao Francisco de Paula. Takes

me forever to get a taxi in this town when it's raining."

"We weel check your story," the lieutenant said. "Meanwhile, nobody here ees to leave the city, eh?"

Just then another of the CIA men Regina and Randy had seen at the airport burst in, out of breath and soaking wet. He gasped for air a couple of times before croaking, "They want you guys on the double. We've got him cornered."

"Got *who* cornered?" DePussa blinked.

"Murgatroid Schnook. One of our guys spotted him over on the Copacabana beachfront a little while ago. Schnook got away, but not before our man put a bullet in him. The rain washed a lot of the blood away, but not all of it. Our man in the Copacabana trailed Schnook to a second-rate hotel near the beach and has him pinned down, up on the roof."

"You have called the emergency squad I set op for joost such an emergency?" asked DePussa, heading for the door.

"Of course," the agent answered. "We've got searchlights and a ring of guys with tommyguns around the place. He can't get away, this time, but I thought you and Mr. Hands would like to be in on the kill."

"Good God, we can't *kill* him!" snapped the British agent. "Not until the blighter tells us where to find Una Hu and the Hu Ray."

"Well, it ain't gonna be easy," the CIA man shrugged. "He's sworn we'll never take him alive and, somehow, I think he just might mean it. Old Schnook's got a high-powered rifle up there with him and, so far, he's nailed three of your boys and one of ours."

It was four o'clock in the morning when Regina, having finished her act and fought off Randy in the taxi from the club, reached her room at the hotel. She deftly avoided the pass her impetuous friend made at her door and, slamming it fondly in his face, switched on the lights.

The man seated in the overstuffed chair across the

room was wet from his rain-soaked dirty gray hair to his soggy brown shoes. Regina thought, at first, the dye from his shoes was running. But the puddle of water around the foot of the chair was too bright to be shoe dye. It was blood. The man had been hit in the left lung and the blood pulsed in a steady trickle down the side of his wet trenchcoat. Regina might have felt sorry for the pitiful wreck of a once-handsome man who now sat, dying, in her room, if the man hadn't been pointing a Luger pistol at her.

"Mister Schnook, I presume?" Regina said, coolly.

"Murgatroid Schnook's the name and espionage is my game," the man in the wet trenchcoat smiled wanly in a husky British accent. "In other words, I'm a spy. I just came in from the Copa."

"It figures."

"I have been betrayed. Us spies are always getting betrayed. It's worse than being a husband in suburbia."

"Or a wife, even," nodded Regina. "Can I fix you a drink, Murgatroid sweetie?"

"It would only leak out of me," the wounded man sighed. "I rather fancy I shall die in a few minutes. Dum-dum bullets, you know. Medusa always uses dumdum bullets."

"I'll watch out for Medusa, then, dying spy, honey. By the way, wasn't Medusa that Greek broad with snakes in her hair?"

"You read." Schnook sneezed, spraying the rug between them with a fine spray of blood and adding, "Sorry about that. Yes, Regina, alias the Blue Queen, Medusa was the mythological monster who killed every man who looked at her face by turning them to stone." He grimaced in pain and continued, "In real life, the hired assassin known to the trade only as Medusa uses (gasp!) a gun. Pity about that, actually. I rather fancy the idea of becoming a statue. I mean, if one *must* shuffle off this mortal coil, why not do it in style, what?"

"Quite," answered Regina in a clipped English tone

of her own. "But, darling, you haven't told me why you came to me. I don't really know as much about gunshot wounds as you might have heard."

"Nothing can be done for me. Nothing, nothing, nothing."

"You said that, Murgie-wergie. So, if nothing can be done for you, what can I do for you?"

"You have to carry on," Murgatroid Schnook sighed. "I know you are actually the Blue Queen, besides being Regina, Star Of Stage Screen and Television. I, Murgatroid Schnook, betrayed secret agent, pass the torch from dying hands. It is up to you, Blue Queen, to take my place."

"One question, sweetums."

"What's that?"

"What's in it for me?"

"Don't you want to save democracy, mom's blueberry pie, and the miniskirt?"

"For free?"

"How about a few million dollars?"

"That's better, Murgie wergie, lover. What do we have to do to get it? I think I'd better add that my, ah, assistant and I do not, repeat *not* kill for hire. Anything else you have in mind might be worth discussing."

"You have to get Una Ha to Hollywood."

"Oh? Is she photogenic?"

"She's gorgeous and I (sob) love her. That's why you must get to her before (shudder) Medusa does! Take her to Hollywood, deliver her to RAPE, and her friends there will see that you are amply rewarded."

"RAPE?" Regina blinked. "Do you have to go all the way to California for *that*?"

"I am speaking," sniffed Murgatroid Schnook, delicately, "of the office of Research and Progressive Education in Hollywood. It's on Selma Avenue. Una has the address. Just get her to RAPE and they'll carry on from there."

"Assuming I wanted to help Una Hu get away, Murgie-wergie, where would I find her? And how do you know she hasn't already *been* found? The last I heard, there were more fuzz closing in on the Copacabana than there are fleas on my Uncle Hiram's hound dog."

"That was a ruse." Murgatroid chuckled, allowing more blood to trickle down his chin. "I was to meet her in Ipanema, after contacting a Brazilian rubber baron about a business deal. I thought I was dealing with an honorable businessman. Or, at least, a businessman. But that blasted DeSilva simply has no imagination. Thought it would be cheaper to have me shot than to pay for the Hu Ray like a gentleman. Oh well, c'est la goddam guerre. At any rate, when I discovered I'd walked into a trap, I knew better than to go back to Una in Ipanema. I exposed myself deliberately in the Copacabana, and then, having exchanged a few harmless shots with a CIA man who couldn't hit the side of a barn if he was inside it, led them to a certain hotel I know in the Copa. One with a no longer-used dumbwaiter shaft. After I had everyone watching me on the roof, I slid down the rope to the cellar and simply walked out the door with the other tenants as they evacuated the building."

"Rather clever of you, with all those bullets in you."

"I thought so at the time. Only two bullets in me, actually. Unfortunately, both are in deucedly awkward places. I say, I rather fancy I'll have that drink, now, if you don't mind."

Aware that her guest was not long for this world, Regina went over to a portable bar and started to mix a tall one. Then, taking another look at Murgatroid Schnook, she decided to make it a short one. As she got out the glasses and ice, Regina asked where Una Hu was hiding.

"There's a park just off the beach. Don't remember its name, but there's a statue of Dom Pedro on horseback in it. I told Una to meet me there at midnight. Rather fancy she's becoming a bit impatient by now."

"And wet." Regina nodded, dryly, as she handed him his drink. Then she picked up the house phone and, when she had Randy on the line, said, "Lover, I know it's late, but there's something I want you to do for me."

"I'll be delighted," Randy answered huskily. "Your place or mine, doll?"

"That's not what I had in mind, lover. I want you to pick up the girl from Ipanema."

"At this hour? The beach'll be closed."

"Her name is Una Ha and you'll find her near a statue of a horse. Tapping her foot rather impatiently, I imagine."

Regina finished giving Randy his instructions and, hanging up, turned back to her wounded guest.

"And now, Murgatroid honey," she said, "I'd like to hear more about this whole caper."

But, just at this minute, there was a thunderous thud on the door and a voice bellowed, "Open up, Senhor Schnook. We know you are een there!"

"It's the police!" Schnook gasped. "I must hide!"

"The john," Regina whispered, raising her voice as she faced the door and called, "Is that little ol' Pao De-Pussa a-bangin' on my little ol' door?"

"Si, senhorita. Let me in!"

"Not by the hair on my chinny chin chin, Lieutenant honey. I'm not decent!"

"We know you are not *alone*, either, Senhorita Regina! There ees a trail of bloody drops leading right to your door."

"Oh, darn!" Regina exclaimed, slipping swiftly out of her clothes without looking to see if Schnook was still in the room or not. Ignoring the frantic hammering on her door, Regina finished what she was doing and then, stark naked, threw open her steamer trunk and selected a red dress. "I never cared for you, anyway," She sighed, tossing the dress in a heap on top of the bloody puddle near the now empty chair Murgatroid Schnook had been

sitting in. Then she picked up the pitcher of ice water and emptied it over the dress, stamping it with her bare foot to insure it was soaked as, behind her, something solid hit the door with a thud that shook the room.

"You can't come in, I'm not dressed!" she wailed in what she hoped was a convincing manner. At that moment, the door burst inward and DePussa and a burly-looking henchman staggered into the room with drawn guns and expectant looks.

What Pao DePussa saw, however, was not what he'd been expecting.

"You—you *beast*!" Regina sobbed, covering herself, not very well, with her hands.

DePussa reddened and gasped. "My apologies, Senhorita. We thought Schnook was een here weeth you!"

"With me in this condition? Lieutenant honey, how *could* you?"

"Eet was the drops, senhorita," DePussa stuttered, pointing at the line of spatter marks crossing the rug to point accusingly at the wet red dress lying by the chair.

"Is *that* why you came bursting in on me in the altogether, you naughty boy?" Regina pouted, letting one hand slip just a bit in a most disarming gesture. "You thought those li'l old drops were *blood*?"

"They look like blood, Senhorita. At least, they look like blood meexed weeth rainwater. And, seence thees Murgatroid Schnook was seen a few meenutes ago een thees part of town . . ."

"Silly," Regina cut in. "It's that *dress*!"

"The dress, Senhorita?"

"Honestly, boys, I'll never buy another dress in that place again. I mean, it looked like a bargain, but the first time I wore it out in the rain . . . I mean, look at the perfect mess it made when the colors ran!"

"You mean . . . these drops . . . they are from your *dress*?"

"You should have seen *me*!" Regina nodded. Then,

turning coyly away, she added, over her shoulder, "I mean, you should have seen me before I had time to shower. I was *covered* with red dye."

"My apologies, Senhorita." DePussa sighed, bowing gallantly and turning to leave. Then he stopped and swung around, eyes narrowed to ask, "Eef you have joost taken the shower, Senhorita, how ees eet that you are *wearing your makeup?*"

"Score one for you, sweetums," Regina muttered, dryly. The Blue Queen stood there, staring back at the detectives for the next million years or so. Then she sighed, "I put it on *after* the shower."

"At thees hour? *Theatrical* makeup?"

"We have an early matinee?"

"We weel have to search your rooms, Senhorita."

"I was afraid you'd say something like that," Regina swore, taking a practical pair of slacks and a washable print blouse from the steamer trunk. There was no telling how clean the jails were in Rio de Janeiro, and no way of knowing when, if ever, she was getting out. She might as well be comfortable.

DePussa's assistant, gun drawn, went into the bedroom. Regina noticed DePussa was still keeping her company and had an uncharitable thought about his manhood until, catching sight of the shattered lock on her door, she realized why he didn't want to leave her alone. Oh, yes, a washable blouse and slacks were *definitely* in order!

"He ees not een the bedroom, Lieutenant," the other detective said, coming back to catch Regina in a very undignified position as she was putting on her slacks.

"Try the bathroom.' DePussa shrugged, not taking his eyes off Regina as he asked, "Do you not wear *any* underwear, Senhorita?"

"Honey, when I strip, I strip for action!"

"*I* am said to be a man of action, Senhorita!" DePussa smiled, with an insinuating glance at the bedroom door.

Regina considered his offer as she finished dressing. Cops had been known to offer to let a girl go for certain

favors in return. The trouble was, they usually busted her downtown anyway. And hiding a wanted criminal was a bigger rap than the usual charges girls were picked up on. Regina was no prude, and the lieutenant was a handsome devil, but one had to draw the line somewhere and the Blue Queen did not relish the idea of letting any man make a fool of her. Usually, it was the other way around.

Before she could make up her mind, the detective came out of the bathroom. Having been braced for shots, or at least a bit of noise, Regina was surprised at both the silence and the puzzled look on the man's face as he said, "Nobody een there, Lieutenant. I theenk maybe the senhorita ees tell the truth! There were more of the red drops een there. She most have been dreeping weeth the dye when she took her shower, no?"

"The window?" DePussa frowned.

"I checked eet," the other replied in an injured tone. "Eet leads out only to an airshaft."

"Could he have climbed down?"

"Lieutenant, thees ees the twentieth floor!"

DePussa shrugged and, with a regretful glance at the bedroom door, sighed, "Een that case, Senhorita, eet seems I *do* owe you an apology. We weel, of course, pay the hotel for the damage to your door. I, ah, suppose you are not een the mood for a nightcap? Joost to show there ees no hard feelings?"

"You suppose right, honey." Regina answered in an icy tone as she wondered where in the hell Murgatroid Schnook had gone.

DePussa and his assistant exchanged glances and then, with another murmured apology, they left.

Regina waited until she heard the elevator doors close and dashed into the bathroom. He wasn't in the shower stall, or anywhere else. She looked thoughtfully at the windowsill. There was a single watery red drop on it. Frowning, Regina wondered if it was remotely possible that a man, wounded, could climb down the side of a

twenty story airshaft in a driving rainstorm. She opened the window and looked out. There was a pipe of some sort near the window. Murgatroid Schnook was apparently something of a human fly and the pipe led downward, but, with two dumdum bullets in him . . . ?

Regina leaned out and followed the pipe down the airshaft with her eyes. Then she gasped. A small figure was lying, spreadeagled, at the concrete bottom of the air shaft. A circle of what looked, in the darkness, like grape preserves was spattered in a big messy circle around the body. Murgatroid Schnook *hadn't* been able to *climb* down a twenty-story airshaft. He'd *fallen* down it!

Chapter FOUR

Dom Pedro was a funny guy. He'd been appointed to run Brazil by his father once. Only he doublecrossed the King of Portugal and crowned himself Emperor as Dom Pedro the First. There wasn't any second. Once Brazil had its independence from Portugal, it decided to go whole hog and be independent from Dom Pedro. He meant well, though, and the Brazilians, over the years, have erected statues, lots of statues, to Dom Pedro. Apparently Dom Pedro never walked or took a cab. He's always on a horse.

The girl from Ipanema was mad as a wet hen by the time Randy Kidd found her under Dom Pedro's horse. She was also mad as a wet girl. She was also wet.

"I've been standing here since *midnight*, you sonovabitch!" she screamed as Randy approached. Then, catching a glimpse of him under a lamplight, she said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were my . . . my Daddy."

"You must be little Una Hu, aged nineteen and vavavavoom!"

"How did you know my name?" she blinked, looking up at Randy with a pair of Eurasian eyes that made a man want to drown himself in either one.

"Murgatroid sent me," Randy explained.

"Is he all right?" she gasped. "Nothing's happened to my daddy, has it?"

"He's been hurt," Randy said. "Nothing serious, we hope. I'm to take you to him. Shall we go?"

"I have to stop by my pad first," Una Hu answered. "I'm soaking wet and there's something there I have to bring with me."

"The Hu Ray?"

"You have been talking to my Daddy!" she smiled, relaxing her guard for the first time. She took Randy by the hand and led him down a maze of side streets to a shabby-looking frame building. Her pad was on the second story. While she put a pot of coffee on a hot plate to boil and rummaged around in her bags for dry things, Randy called the hotel.

"You've picked up that package we were talking about?" asked the Blue Queen. Randy, as aware as Regina that the phone was probably bugged by now, answered, "Yeah, hard to find a store open at this hour. But I managed, over on the Rua do Sao Francisco de Paula. I'll bring it over, if I can catch a cab."

"Can't we make it later this morning, Randy?" Regina sighed, "I've just had some . . . company, and I'm a little tired. Why don't you call me at the club later, and tell me where to meet you?"

"Okay," Randy answered, watching absently as Una Hu stripped her wet things off in back of a Japanese screen. He wondered if she knew about that rather large hole in the screen. It was at a height from the floor just level with the petite Eurasian girl's tawny hips and, when she took her wet panties off, there really wasn't much point in her being behind the screen in the first place.

Hanging up the phone, Randy took a cigarette out and lit it.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes," Una Hu said.

"That makes two of us," Randy agreed. "Things are sort of complicated, doll. We can't go to the hotel, after all. It's full of fuzz."

"Oh God, what if they've caught my Daddy Murgatroid, or . . . what if they know where we are?"

"Relax. I gave an address clean over on the other side of town. I don't know about Daddy Murgatroid, but his baby doll better camp here for the night."

"But where will *you* stay?"

"Where else but right here, kitten? Like, baby it's raining outside."

"But there is only one bed!"

"Yeah?" grinned Randy. "Things are looking up!"

"I wouldn't send a dog out on a night like this," Una Hu shrugged, coming out from behind the screen in a saffron terry cloth kimono. "But I think it's only fair to warn you that my heart belongs to Daddy."

"Sweetheart," Randy grinned, getting up and moving in for the kill, "it's not your *heart* I'm *interested* in!"

The service elevator let Regina out in the basement and the Blue Queen moved cautiously on sneaker-clad feet. There was nobody there, at this hour, and she was able to move, unobserved, to the door leading out into the airshaft. The nine-by-twelve carpet she'd snitched from her room upstairs made a heavy bundle, rolled up on her shoulder. It would be even heavier once she rolled what was left of Murgatroid Schnook in it. But it had to be done. She'd cleaned up the bathroom and the tile floor of the hallway outside her door, but the carpet was something she had to get rid of, before Lieutenant DePussa had second thoughts about a chemical analysis of her mysterious "dye spots."

Things were liable to get a bit frantic as soon as someone stuck his head out a window and took a good daylight peek at the mess on the bottom of the airshaft, too. So, with economy of effort, Regina intended to get rid of both Murgatroid Schnook and the messy carpet he'd left in her pad.

Dropping the carpet beside the door, Regina took a very deep breath and opened it. She was braced for the sight of a mangled man who'd fallen twenty stories, but the sight that greeted the Blue Queen's eyes as she stared into the airshaft brought a gasp to her lips.

Wordlessly, Regina stepped out into the rain. Could she have lost her way in the basement? Could she have

opened a door to *another* airshaft? But no! There was the blood. Lots of blood. Blood all over the place, slowly being washed away by the rain. But the body, the body of Murgatroid Schnook, was missing!

The rain beat a steady tattoo against the window of the darkened room as Randy reached for the pack of cigarettes he'd left on the end table beside the bed. Beside him, Una Hu stirred languidly in her sleep and, running a small warm hand up his naked thigh, asked,

"Can't you sleep, lover?"

"I've been thinking," Randy muttered, moving her hand absently to a more comfortable, though disquieting, position.

"Again?" Una marveled, kneading his flesh expertly with her tapered fingers.

"Lemme finish this cigarette, doll," he agreed. "But that's not what I was thinking about."

"I thought, from the way you acted, it was all you *ever* think about. How many times *was* that, anyway?"

"So who counts? I'm worried about Regina."

"The Blue Queen?" the girl pouted, sinking her nails in a trifle as she purred. "Can she do anything *I* can't, Randy darling?"

"I'm worried about her and the *fuzz*, dammit!" he snorted in annoyance. "We couldn't talk on the phone, and *something's* up. But I don't know what. There are so many angles to this whole business I just don't understand. Do you have your father's Hu Ray with you?"

"Only the plans," Una explained. "Most of my father's equipment was destroyed when the Viet Cong blew up his laboratory. Fortunately he'd been doing some work at home and I was able to salvage a set of blueprints."

"And then this Murgatroid guy contacted you and brought you to Brazil? Why didn't you take your father's blueprints to the U.S. Army? I imagine they'd pay plenty for a ray that melted all the truck tires on the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

"They would if they believed me," the girl sighed, "but a nasty old man at U.S. military headquarters said the Hu Ray was impossible. They wouldn't even offer me any special bodyguard. And this was after my father had been killed! Why, if my father was just the crackpot the American electronics engineers said he was, did the Viet Cong kill him?"

"Maybe they were just feeling beastly," Randy mused. "Have you ever seen the Hu Ray in action?"

"Only a small model. Murgatroid was as suspicious as yourself when he first contacted him in Hong Kong. But you can get anything made in Hong Kong and Murgatroid, with what little cash he had on hand, managed to have a small working model built."

"It worked?"

"Yes. It was very embarrassing. We didn't know, then, that the Hu Ray bounces off mirrors like light. Murgatroid had set the model up on a table and shot it at a rubber dolly. The dolly turned all icky and melted into a puddle without any heat or anything. But the beam went on until it hit the mirror across the room and bounced back to us. That was when Murgatroid first became my Big Daddy. I mean, I was wearing a rubber panty-girdle under a dacron sheath and Murgatroid was wearing a synthetic wool suit with rayon underwear and when we both found ourselves stark naked . . ."

"I get the picture," Randy laughed. "But what happened to the model?"

"Murgatroid sold it to the Chinese Reds," she answered.

"Just like that? Do you realize what this means?"

"Oh, pooh, my Big Daddy didn't sell it to them in working order! We needed money to get out of that part of the world, so Murgatroid demonstrated the model to a Chincom agent and arranged to sell it. They were very cute about it. Insisted on a last demonstration before they paid, and they didn't pay us that much, believe you me! Anyway, Murgatroid dissolved a few things for them and then, as the money changed hands, he palmed one

small vital part. A laseroid lens of a special chemical composition my father worked out. That was what made the Hu Ray work, you know. Without that one vital part, it's just another laser machine."

"Conned the Commies, eh?" Randy mused. "But why, if you wanted to sell it, did you bring it *here*, of all places?"

"Murgatroid knows a man, a Senhor DeSilva, here in Rio, who's very interested in lousing up his competition. He offered my Big Daddy just oodles of money for the Hu Ray, and Murgatroid was supposed to call me, as soon as he had the money in his hands. Once DeSilva paid, I was to meet them both in the park where you found me."

"With the plans?"

"Don't be silly. You know the plans were right here all the time. Murgatroid would send me, with DeSilva, back here to the apartment to get the plans while he stashed the money away in a safe place. Poor Murgatroid's been betrayed so often he just doesn't trust anybody. But, the way we set it up, everybody had to trust each other."

"Figures," Randy shrugged. "Only something seems to have gone wrong with the plan. At least, your big daddy's not here at the moment."

"No," Una Hu purred, tightening her grasp on Randy's . . . person. "But *you* are!"

Chapter FIVE

THERE ARE two ways to hide something. You can bury it so deep nobody will ever know where to look for it, or, as in Poe's story of the Purloined Letter, you can leave it out in such plain sight that the people who're looking for it to be *hidden* never notice it. It was the latter choice the Blue Queen made, once they'd gotten together on the bathing beach at Ipanema. Having gotten a look at Una Hu in a bikini, and asking a few questions about her dancing ability, Regina told her to pack her things and took her to Dirty Dick's Discotheque.

"*She* don't look like Ingrid Bergman, neither!" Dirty Dick growled as he was introduced to the Little Eurasian.

"Perhaps not," Regina soothed, "but you *do* need a new go-go dancer to replace the murdered one, don't you?"

"Maybe," Dirty Dick muttered darkly. "Let's see your legs, honey. What did you say your name was?"

"Actually, it's Martha," answered the well-rehearsed Una, "but my professional name is Wiggles. Wiggles Goode."

Dirty Dick shrugged, said, "You're hired. Fourth dressing room on the right." Then he slumped weakly against the bar and sobbed, "Play it again, Tom."

"That po leece lieutenant was around befo', Miss Regina," Tom said as they walked past his piano. "The cat they call DePussy."

"Did he say what he wanted?" Regina asked.

"No. But he said he'd be back."

He was. But, by the time Lieutenant DePussa returned, alone, to the club, Una Hu was in her cage, bumping and grinding in the tempo to Randy's piano along with

Passion Flowers as the Blue Queen, in a shimmering blue sequined gown, sang the latest rock and roll sensation with a tinsanda beat. As Regina had predicted, the detective gave Una a casually hungry glance, but that was all. If he even knew Una Hu was in Rio, he'd hardly have expected her to be doing bumps and grinds in a fringed bikini. Topless yet.

Randy smiled at the lieutenant as DePussa came over by the piano and leaned an elbow on it. "Still trying to find out who killed Voddie Ville?" Randy asked.

"And other people, Meester Keed," the detective answered.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Last night, sometime shortly after midnight, a man was murdered. His name was DeSilva. Does the name DeSilva reeng any bells, Senhor Keed?"

"Should it?"

"Perhaps. DeSilva was a very wealthy Brazilian indoostrialist. We have reason to believe hees death ees een some way connected weeth Voddie Ville's. At least, both of them were, how you say, hooked op weeth the Blue Queen, eh?"

"Three down and three to go," Randy muttered.

"*Three*, Senhor Keed? But I am only eenvestigating *two* deaths! Yes there sometheeng you have not told me, Senhor Keed?"

"I was thinking of the act," Randy explained. "Regina has six numbers in this set. I'm halfway through. I'm dying for a drink."

"Lots of people seem to die around thees place, lately," the lieutenant shrugged, walking away. Randy caught Regina's eye and winked reassuringly. The Blue Queen was a pro who never blew her cool, but it was a good idea, now and then, to let her know things were still jake. Una Hu, alias Wiggles Goode, wasn't half as cool. The girl in the go-go cage was scared skinny and it would have showed had anyone but Randy been looking at her face.

Randy waited until their eyes met and gave her a reas-

suring smile. Una smiled back wanly. Then her eyes widened as she looked at something behind Randy. Randy turned in the direction of her stare and gasped, "The Martians have landed!"

Really, they didn't look that much like Martians. There were two of them. A man and a woman, Randy thought. The man was wearing a skin-tight leotard of orange and green dominos, a silver mask with a grotesque Pinocchio nose, and a Viking helmet. The woman was dressed mostly in skin, painted in LSD patterns of lipstick and eyebrow pencil, a hula skirt of ostrich feathers, two silver pasties, and a headdress she'd stolen from the rear end of a peacock. The odd couple walked sedately to a ringside table and sat down as Randy muttered, "What the hell . . ." before remembering it had stopped raining, and that this *was* Mardi Gras time in Rio.

Other weirdos began to filter in as the evening wore on. Most of them were slightly bombed, some were boisterous, and the sound of Regina's singing was just about swallowed up in the general din of tinkling glass, happy shouts of greetings, and the steady fusillade of popping champagne corks. As it turned out, they never finished the last number. Some crazy Carioca decided, for reasons known best to himself, that *Downtown* was a Conga. It wasn't, but that didn't stop them from forming a Conga line.

The next thing Regina, Randy, and the two girls knew, they were part of a six- or seven-block long Conga line, snake-dancing down the zebra-striped sidewalks of the Avenida Rio Branco in the direction of the waterfront. Or at least, the general direction of the waterfront. The Conga line, growing by the moment as more and more weirdly costumed Cariocas and many tourists were pressed into service, snaked through, under, over, and around anything it could. If you ever want to see Rio from every angle, join a Conga line during the Mardi Gras.

They Conga'd in the street and they Conga'd through

other nightclubs, restaurants, a few apartment houses, and one hapless all-night drug store, as well as through the lower parlor of what can only be described, euphemistically, as a brothel. It was in the latter place that Randy was handed a mask with the observation, freely translated from the Portuguese, that he was being a party pooper. The mask was a papier-mâche head of a rooster: not *completely* in keeping with Kidd's character, but, all things considered, close enough on such short notice. Not to be outdone, Randy took off his pants and kicked them out into the street. Once a passing Carioca had decorated his naked legs with some attractive blobs of blue paint and another had drawn a shocking graffito on the back of his white dinner jacket, Randy felt less conspicuous. I mean, who looks twice, during Mardi Gras, at a man dancing in the streets of Rio in jockey shorts, dinner jacket, ruffled shirt and bowtie? Especially when, from the bowtie up, he looks like a crowing rooster?

Una Hu, being nearly naked to start with, was more in costume from the beginning. Somebody passed her a black mask with cat's ears and whiskers and, after she'd been spattered with a few gobs of dayglow watercolors and had lipstick target rings drawn around each bouncing nipple, she looked like any healthy red-blooded Brazilian girl at Mardi Gras.

Regina had paid a bit too much for her sequin gown to toss it away as lightly as Randy had his pants. To keep it from being completely ruined, she slipped out of it at the first opportunity and wrapped it around her head as a magnificent glittering turban. Since she was stark naked under her outer attire, she drew a few curious glances until some Carioca, in a sudden burst of propriety, offered her a hand painted silk necktie. It was a wide tie, but hardly wide enough to do more than distract the eye as Regina looped it around her waist, allowing the ends to hang down in front. It didn't really hide her charms but, as the man who'd given her the necktie pointed out, it

was against the law to appear *stark* naked on the streets of Rio, even during Mardi Gras.

As people dropped out of the line from time to time, due to exhaustion, drunkenness, or fun and games with the person whose fanny they'd been holding for a few blocks, Randy was able to work his way up to Regina. Closing up the gap left by a couple who'd dropped out, giggling merrily, as the line passed a clump of frangipangi in a small wayside park, Randy took one of the Blue Queen's shapely haps in each suddenly moist palm and asked, "Regina, why in the hell are we doing this?"

"Because we were invited to," she shot back over her shoulder. "Besides, that darned old lieutenant was hanging around and, just before the brawl started, I spotted that British Intelligence man at the bar. I didn't really want to talk with either of them but I couldn't think of a way to take the rest of the date off without raising all sorts of suspicions."

Randy thought a moment before answering, "I.C. Hands?"

"Why no, Randy lover, your hands are unusually warm at the moment."

"So am I, babe. I was referring, however, to our old buddy, I.C. Hands of British Intelligence."

"Of course, that *was* the chap's name, wasn't it? I imagine, now that he's lost the trail of Murgatroid Schnook, he'll be a perfect pest until we tell him the poor man is dead."

"Are we *going* to tell him?"

"Of course not. That's why I'm so certain he's going to be a pest. Of course, after we deliver our package to Hollywood, and pick up our just deserts, I imagine we really ought to tell somebody. He may have a family. They'd probably like to know what happened, if we ever find out, I mean."

"One guy knows, at least," Randy answered, noticing they were now staggering one-two-three-kick over

what felt like sand or soft dirt. "Whoever scraped Schnook's stiff off the bottom of that airshaft knows, at least, where he's been stashed. I still can't figure why anybody'd go to all that trouble, though. If they'd just let him lie there, we'd have been stuck with him."

"You mean *I* would have," Regina answered, sarcastically. "You and your new-found friend didn't wake up until noon. Or, at least, if you did, neither of you seemed to want to get out of bed!"

"Are you jealous of Una Hu?"

"Of course not! If I chose to have a vendetta with every girl you've slept with since we've been working together, I wouldn't have time for anything else, Randy-wandy. As far as that goes, it would keep me mighty busy just thinking about the ones this year."

"So I'm heterosexual," Randy shrugged.

He got the chance to prove his statement a few moments later when the Conga line, hitting the Atlantic Ocean, broke up in a hilarious burst of splashing, laughter, screams of delight, outrage, and surprise. Since everyone was now on the beach, and the crowd was evenly matched as to sexes, what happened next can best be described if you imagine a Roman orgy staged by Cecil B. DeMille with the Romans dressed up in outlandish costumes and masks. But, of course, the Hollywood censors were not allowed to cut anything from the script this time.

Randy lost track of Regina as a large, overupholstered female wrapped her fat arms around him in a bear hug and started crooning at him in Portuguese. Randy did not speak Portuguese. But it was obvious the fat lady wanted to be friends.

He lost his papier mâché rooster head in the process, but emerged from the ensuing struggle with his virtue intact. For a few minutes. The next lady who spoke to him in Portuguese was built like a Greek goddess and Randy, being a gentleman, could not very well struggle against his obviously pre-ordained fate. The lady pulled

Randy down beside her in the sand and murmured all sorts of things he didn't understand in his ears while her hands, inside his jockey shorts, spoke a language that is international. By this time, Randy wasn't wearing anything else but his bowtie and the lady was naked except for a coat of yellow pancake makeup, dotted with leopard spots of black eyeliner and a rather sinister-looking feline mask. As they came to know one another better, Randy considered removing the mask. If her face was as nice as the rest of her . . . But, some things are best left to the imagination and Randy left the mask alone.

It was a little embarrassing, despite the darkness and the fact that nobody seemed to notice what they were doing, but, when the lady offered to speak French as well as Portuguese, Randy decided to split. Fun's fun, but on a public beach?

The leopard woman, after chasing him for a few yards, dropped off to proposition another Carioca whose physical charms were astoundingly visible under the skin-tight babalu pants he was wearing. Randy dog trotted a few yards and paused to get his bearings as several loud reports, like pistol shots, broke through the uproar of laughter and shouts. Suddenly a woman screamed. Not a happy scream. A scream of pure animal terror that chilled the blood and made the Cariocas pause in their play. She screamed again, to be joined by others, and, ahead of him, Randy Kidd could see a circle of Mardi Gras revelers gathering around something lying, very still, on the beach.

It was a man. Naked except for one shoe and a mask he'd picked up along the way. A large papier mâché rooster head. It was the same rooster head Randy had abandoned to the fat lady. The fat lady was standing nearby, screaming over and over as if her needle was stuck. The man in the rooster mask had been shot, more than once, with what looked, from the ghastly exit wounds, like dumdum bullets.

A familar figure in a blue-sequined turban ran over

and threw her arms around Randy and Regina sobbed, weakly, "Oh, Randy, I thought . . . I thought it was *you*!"

"Yeah," Randy Kidd muttered, holding the Blue Queen's nude body against his own as he stared morosely down at the bullet-riddled body and added, "So did someone else!"

Chapter SIX

RANDY, the Blue Queen, and Una Hu had moved off down the beach by the time the fuzz arrived to question the suddenly subdued crowd. Down the beach, they found more fun, games, and laughter, but settled, all three of them, for a skinny dip in the sea.

Rio de Janeiro, like the rest of South America, has reversed seasons from the northern hemisphere. So it was pleasantly warm for that time of the year. The cleansing sea water washed their bodies free of the sweat, grime, and makeup they'd picked up in the past hour or so and they stayed there, in the sea, until things began to quiet down. Then Randy found a couple of beach towels for the girls. He'd had the foresight to hang onto his jockey shorts. For one thing, his wallet was in the waistband. So, cleaned off and pleasantly sleepy, the three of them walked back to the hotel through the thinning clouds of confetti and Cariocas.

Declining an invitation to a *ménage à trois*, firmly but politely, Regina said good night to the other two at her repaired door and Randy took Una to his room down the hall. At least, he started to take her to his room down the hall. That was, however, before Regina screamed.

"Stay here!" Randy warned, leaving Una Hu where she was to go tearing down the hall to Regina's rescue. The door was locked on the inside but that didn't even slow him down as Randy hit it, still running, and plunged into the middle of a nightmarish scene.

There were three of them. Three people dressed in Mardi Gras costume, or, at least, disguised. One was dressed as a devil, another as some sort of ghoul in a black

robe with a grinning papier-mâché skull over his head, and the third, with more imagination, was clad in a shimmering green toga that effectively concealed his or her figure. As the person in the green toga whirled to face him, Randy gasped—not so much because of the Gorgon head mask leering malevolently at him from its fringe of green papier-mâche snakes as the fact that the person dressed as Medusa was holding a wicked-looking little Beretta in one hand.

The other two were trying to hold onto the Blue Queen, without much luck. Regina was stronger than her feminine proportions might lead one to suspect, and she fought dirty.

Perhaps it was the groan of anguish from one of the men she'd just given the knee that threw the person in the Medusa mask off as he, or she, fired. Randy, still moving in on the balls of his feet, fast, felt something sear along his side like a red hot poker as he drove a balled-up fist into the Medusa's gut. The gun went off again, spanging off the floor between Randy's bare ankles as the latter chopped down hard with the edge of his palm. There was a gasp of pain as the bone of Medusa's forearm snapped like a twig and the gun fell to the floor. Randy hit Medusa once again for the road and, as the person in green staggered back, dropped to one knee to retrieve the Beretta.

Something exploded against the side of Randy's head and he realized, dimly, that one of the men struggling with Regina had let go of her to circle around the wall behind him. He wondered, as he sank into a bottle of India ink amid pinwheeling stars, whether he'd been caught napping by the devil or the ghoul. And then the India ink closed over his head and he stopped wondering about anything as the floor came up to smack him in the face.

So this was what it felt like to die? Randy knew he was dead. He'd been fighting off three thugs, at least one of them armed with a pistol, when he blacked out. Obvi-

ously, then, he *had* to be dead. But he didn't feel dead. He felt too lousy to be dead.

"How do you feel, lover?" an angel was asking from some cloud or another. The angel sounded remarkably like Regina. Randy opened his eyes and, guess what, it *was* Regina.

He was lying on Regina's bed. The Blue Queen, Lieutenant DePussa, and a bald man who seemed to be some kind of a doctor were hovering over him. Randy grimaced, felt tenderly at the side of his rib cage the bullet had grazed, and noticed he'd been bandaged up. So much for the bullet hole. Now if only there was some way to unscrew his head until it stopped throbbing . . .

"We were een the lobby," DePussa explained without waiting to be asked. "When we hord the shots, we came op."

"Lucky thing, too," Regina added. "When you went down, lover, that left me to handle all three of them, all by my lonesome in my birthday suit."

"One was in no condition to go ten rounds with you," Randy grunted, sitting up and rubbing the back of his head. "I busted the creep's arm."

"Are you sure?" asked DePussa.

"Sure I'm sure. I karate chopped his gun arm. Heard the bone snap. You guys nail any of them?"

"No. Unfortunately, they seem to have had a lookout near the elevator shaft. As we started op, they started out. My partner ees checking the other rooms on thees floor. Bot I do not theenk we weel find anything. Seence all three were wearing masks and costumes, we have no way of knowing them even eef we see them again!"

"The one with the broken arm might have a hard time keeping it to himself," Randy frowned.

"Si; I have ordered a check-op on all hospitals een Rio."

"Yeah? How come? I mean, I just now told you about busting the guy's arm, Lieutenant."

"But of course, Senhor Keed," DePussa said smoothly. Was it *too* smoothly? Randy wondered as the lieutenant

went on. "Senhorita Regina has very long feengernails, no?"

"You clawed one of them, kitten?" Randy asked.

"In the eyes," Regina answered demurely. "The old forked fingers in the eyeballs bit. Only nailed one eye, though. The mask threw me off."

"And so," the lieutenant smiled. "we have one man een a Medusa mask and green toga weeth a broken arm, and one man een a devil's costume weeth one eye poked out. I theenk, somehow, they weel, how you say, steek een the memory of any medico they veesit, no?"

"That sounds reasonable," Randy shrugged, swinging his legs off the bed and trying to get up.

The doctor chattered at him in machine-gun Portuguese and DePussa said, "You most not get op for a day or so, Senhor Keed. The medico says you have had a concussion."

"Many times," Randy sighed. "Concussions go with being a knock-around guy. Look, gang, it's been grand but I've simply got to split. Got to get to bed and take care of my youth."

"Why Randy," Regina blinked. "Up until now, you've always liked *girls*."

"Yeah," growled Randy. "And I know one girl in particular who's going to be climbing the wall if somebody doesn't clue her in on what's been going on with all this shooting and stuff."

"Ah?" DePussa said, raising an eyebrow. "I tike eet, Senhor, you have a veeseter een your room?"

"A lady visitor, pal," Randy nodded, wondering dimly why he hadn't kept his mouth shut. He was still a little woozy from the blow to his head and the lieutenant had a mousetrap mind.

"I weel see you to your room, Senhor Keed," DePussa said, offering Randy a hand up.

"I can manage," Randy muttered.

"Bot I censeest," DePussa insisted. "You are een no

condeetion to wander through the halls of thees hotel all by yourself. Even eef you were wearing clothes."

Randy started to protest, but a warning look from the Blue Queen made him realize he was padding his part. If the girl in his room was an innocent playmate, or just a playmate with or without her innocence, he was kicking up a suspicious amount of fuss. And one thing Randy did not want was to add any further suspicions to those already buzzing around in the detective's handsome skull.

"Let's go, then," he shrugged, allowing the Leutenant to help him to his feet and telling Regina he'd see her that afternoon at the club. He waited until they were outside his own door before he shook the detective's hand, warmly, and said, "See you around, Lieutenant."

"Are you not going to eentroduce me?"

"Why should I? We've already met."

"I am speakeeng of thees lady we were jost talkeeng about."

"Just now? I don't remember mentionung any ladies."

"Bot I do," DePussa said flatly. "And I weesh to sateesfy myself eet ees not a certain porson."

"Oh, and who might that be?"

"That might be Hu. Una Hu. The gorl Murgatroid Schnook was leevung weeth."

"He isn't leaving with anybody," Randy began. Then he bit his tongue. The fuzz didn't know the guy was dead yet. But they would, if he didn't give his brain a chance to settle down.

"You have seen thees Murgatroid Schnook, Senhor?"

"Never in my life," Randy replied, truthfully for once. Then he brightened and added, "Maybe *he* was one of those guys we tangled with just now!"

"I doubt eet. Murgatroid Schnook was wounded the last time anyone saw heem alive. From what you say, all three of the men who tried to abduct Senhorita Regina were well able to fight."

"Not as well as they should have been. Did you say

abduct? How do you know they were trying to kidnap Regina?"

"At least one of them had a gun, and no hesitation about useeng eet, on *you*. Eef they weeshed to keel her . . ."

"I get the picture," Randy nodded, wondering if he'd led far enough off the track for DePussa to have forgotten about the girl in his room.

He hadn't.

"Got to go now, Lieutenant," Randy tried. "So, if you'll pardon me, I think I'll just say good night."

"After you eentroduce me to the young lady."

"Aw, come on, Lieutenant. Get your own girl, huh? I mean, if you were any kind of a gentleman you wouldn't insist on embarrassing us like this."

"Bot I am not a gentleman, Senhor Keed. I am a policeman. And I do eenseest. Now!"

"Here we go again," sighed Randy, shifting his weight slightly as he gauged the distance between the detective's chin and the casually balled fist hanging at his left. The hall was deserted. If he decked the fuzz in one good coldcock and dragged him inside . . .

Then the door behind him opened and Una Hu stuck her pretty little head out to ask, "Is that you, darling?"

"Gleep," answered Randy. "Also yipes."

"Good evening, senhorita," DePussa smiled, bowing slightly. "We were jost talkeeng about you."

"Nothing naughty, I hope?" answered Una Hu, archly. She was wearing her kimono but, not having expected company, the kimono was open. DePussa smiled wolfishly and answered, "The only naughty theeng I know about you ees that thees naughty Senhor Keed weel not eentroduce us. I saw your act at Dirty Deek's thees eveneeng. Bot I deed not cotch your name."

"This is Wiggles Goode," said Randy, with a warning look at Una Hu. "Wiggles, honey, I want you to meet Lieutenant Pao DePussa of the Rio De Janeiro Municipal Police."

"Gleep!" gleeped Una. Then, snapping back into her cool, she fluttered her eyelashes and added, "Golly, I never met a real detective before. A pleasure, I'm sure."

"The pleasure ees all mine," DePussa replied gallantly. He said good night, with a last wistful glance at the open kimono and then, as an afterthought, turned back to Randy and asked,

"Why were you goeeng to heet me, Senhor Keed?"

"Who said I was going to hit you?"

"Your feet, Senhor. Eef you keep your eyes on a man's feet, they weel often tell you what hees hands are about to do. I assure you, Senhor Keed, I had no intention of, how you say, bird-doggeeng your gorl. I tol' you eet was police business, no?"

"Oh?" Smiled Randy, placing a possessive arm around the girl's slender waist. "Then why'd you make such a big deal out of meeting Wiggles, here?"

"Because, quite frankly, Senhor, I thought eet was posseeble the lady een question might be Una Hu. One of my men reported seeing you een the company of a gorl who answers the descreeption we have of Senhorita Hu. Bot, now I see what hoppened. Senhorita Weegles does feet her general descreeption. Bot, fortunately, I recognized her from earlier at the club!" He preened himself slightly as he added, "You deed not theenk I noteeced her, eh? I assure you, Senhor Keed, that I noteece everytheeng!"

"I know," Randy smiled, and his smile was a bit wider than he meant it to be as he said, "I guess you're just too smart for me."

Chapter SEVEN

"Unhand me, you . . . you beast!" a voice sobbed from somewhere on the other side of Randy's dressing-room door. Randy, getting up from his dressing table, started for the door. But, even though his body was moving faster than his mind, he realized the voice was not that of Regina and he'd left Una back at the hotel to join him later here at the club.

Could it be a trap?

Randy's pistol, a sawed-off Walthers P-38 automatic, now hung in its shoulder holster from a hook near Randy's dressing table. There wasn't time to don the holster or his jacket. So Randy slid the gun out and, holding it in his hand, headed for the action as the same voice wailed, "I *hate* you, you dirty old man!"

There was a full-length mirror hanging on the door, and Randy grinned wryly at the odd picture he made as, gun in hand, stripped to the waist, and barefoot, he opened the door.

There wasn't anyone in the corridor. Cautiously, Randy moved silently down the empty hallway. It sounded as if one of the girls was having a spat, but the voice had held a panicky edge that made Randy wonder.

Then a door just past Regina's flew open and a short stubby body flew out, bounced off the opposite wall, and sat down. It was Pop Weezle.

A battered felt hat flew out after him and the same voice, on the edge of hysteria, cried, "And *stay* out, you lecherous old bastard!"

"I didn't mean no harm, Passion honey!" Pop whimpered, still unaware of Randy as the latter leaned against

the wall with a sardonic smile as the tableau continued. It was kind of funny and pathetic until Pop, with a look of pure animal hatred in his bleary eyes, added, "I'll *get* you for this, girlie."

The hunchback got to his feet with an effort and, pointing a bony finger at Passion Flowers, cackled, "You think a man's made of *wood*, dammit? How do you think it feels, when you're old and ugly, to sit there, day after day, watchin' you girlies twitch your naked behinds? You're teases, all of you. You wouldn't be in this business if you didn't like to show your naked selves off to men. Only it's 'Look and don't touch,' ain't it? Day after day, year after year, old Pop's supposed to sit there, goin' outta his skull with desire, while you goddam chippies dangle it in front of him!"

"Why don't you go play in the traffic!" Passion Flowers spat. "Or better yet, with yourself? Maybe then you wouldn't carry on so. Nobody's teasing you, Pop. Nobody but yourself. Nobody else even knows you're alive!"

"I'll show you who's alive, damn you!" Pop roared, lunging forward and getting a foot in the door before the redhead could slam it.

"Cool it, pops!" Randy sighed, tucking the gun in his waistband and taking a firm but gentle grip on the cripple's arm. The hunchback stiffened and whirled to face his new tormentor. Then his shoulders sagged and his eyes went dull as he whimpered, "She's the worst of the lot. Smilin' and flutterin' her eyelashes at every man she passes. You see the way she swings her bottom? Swings that tail end of hers like a saloon door on payday! And then, when a man takes her up on it, she acts like he done somethin' wrong!"

"Sure, Pop," Randy soothed, shooting a meaningful glance at Passion Flowers. The redhead nodded as she got the message and closed her door. Randy led Pop Weezle out front by one arm and found Tom behind the bar.

"He's got troubles, Tom," Randy explained. "Let's see if we can cheer him up."

"Good gravy, Mistah Kidd. Does *he* want me to play *As Time Goes By* too?"

"I think a drink would do him more good."

"Thank the Lord. Do-Jesus I'm gettin' sick of that tune!"

Tom mixed a couple of highballs, making Pop's a double, and the two men listened, sympathetically, as Pop Weezle inhaled his booze and spewed forth his tale of woe. Bartenders are noted for a philosophic approach to life, but Tom and Randy exchanged disgusted glances as Pop uncovered the wet rock he had over his mind. He really *was* a dirty old man! His collection of pornographic literature was par for the course, and Randy was mildly intrigued by the story of the foam rubber love-toy Pop had picked up in Japan while doing a wartime hitch in the merchant marine.

"They use real girlies to make the mold," Pop explained. "Honest injun, you'd think it was a real live girl instead of a life-sized rubber dolly. Got real hair, long and silky, and she *feels* real, except she don't wiggle." His voice trailed off wistfully and he gulped thirstily at his second drink. He wiped a sleeve across his mouth and sighed, "Gee, I miss my little rubber girlie. She was the nicest thing I ever made love to."

"What happened to her?" asked Randy.

"Lost her in a fire, up in the States. They tried to say it was my fault. Tried to say I'd been drunk on the job or even started the fire after I had this trouble with this trampy stripper and . . . I ask you, would I have set fire to that theatre without I took my rubber dolly home first?"

"That sounds reasonable," Randy nodded. "Pour us another round, Tom?"

"You ain't finished your first one yet," Tom began. Then he nodded and poured Pop Weezle another highball. A triple highball.

"I couldn't tell them that!" Pop whined. "They was already sayin' I was a dirty old man because I had this trou-

ble with this stripper teasing me into making a fool of myself and so I never told them about my rubber dolly. They weren't my *friends*!" He blinked as the triple highball hit bottom and asked, "Ain't you boys my friends?"

"Sure, Pop," Tom shuddered. "Finish your drink."

"There's other things almost as good," Pop mused. "A mason jar full of liver, for instance. Or, if you can afford it, buy a live goose, or a turkey. They're warm and feel like a really hot girlie. Only they die on you after you've loved 'em a few times and besides, there's *nothin'* like the real thing. Not even my rubber dolly was as good as the real thing."

Then, before he could say anything else, Pop suddenly slumped on the stool and Randy, expecting it, caught him. Tom came out from behind the bar and, together, they carried him to a small room near the stage door. It was Pop's office and there was an army cot in one corner. They placed the hunchback on it to sleep it off. Randy said, "That didn't take as long as I expected, Tom. What did you slip into that last drink?"

"Jus' somethin' I keep handy fo' dirty ol' men," Tom replied innocently. "Sides, I was gettin' sick to my stomach. You think he meant that jazz about rapin' birds?"

"They call it avisodomy," Randy shrugged. "Supposed to be a specialty of the house in certain Parisian temples of joy. They say you get a real thrill if you wring the bird's neck at the last moment!"

"Oh lordy, that's one thrill I can do without. I *likes* birds."

"So do I. That's why I've never tried avisodomy. Like, you gotta draw a line *somewhere*."

"*He* don't!" Tom said, pointing to the unconscious hunchback with a look of disgust. "He don't seem to care *what* he does. I'll bet you old Pops would even go in for necrowarsitz."

"Necrophilia?"

"Is that where you makes love to dead folks?"

"Yeah."

"Then that's what I means. I'd bet, did you put a dead gal in here with Sam, he'd make love to her jest like she was his cotton pickin' rubber dolly." Then Tom's eyes widened as a new and sickening thought hit him. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "You don't suppose *that's* what happened to Miss Voddie Ville, does you?"

"That's a good question," Randy mused. "I was just going to ask you the same thing!"

"Pop's off the hook," Regina was saying as she and Randy sat in the greenroom, waiting to go on. "At least, he's off the hook as far as rape as a motive goes. The blonde *wasn't* raped, remember?"

"He might have started out with that in mind, then lost his nerve, or his interest, when he saw her dead. She wasn't a very pretty corpse, you know."

"She was a lot prettier than a turkey!" Regina grimaced. "And that bit with the life sized rubber doll sounds like sublimated necrophilia to me. Most necrophiliacs enjoy the feeling of absolute power they have over the object of their desires. After all, a corpse is the last person to say no, no matter what the necrophiliac wants to do to it. You should read Havelock Ellis. It's amazing what a depraved mind can dream up in the sex department."

"I read Havelock Ellis when I was fifteen," Randy shrugged. "He didn't have anything to say I didn't already know about."

"Naturally," Regina smiled wryly. "You've been depraved since you were younger than fifteen!"

"All my life," agreed Randy proudly. "Okay. So if Pop didn't make love to Voddie Ville after he killed her, why *did* he kill her?"

"We don't know that he did. You say he told you he'd been involved in a fire back in the states? That might be worth checking into. I'll wire a few people I know in the insurance game and see if we can tie Pop and Voddie

Ville together. Meanwhile, remember he might not have done it."

"Yeah, he did have an alibi. Although I don't know if it was ever checked out. What about Dirty Dick? He looks pretty husky."

"I don't see any motive, Randy. I wouldn't want to be alone with Dirty Dick if I were Ingrid Bergman, but otherwise he seems normal around women."

"Yeah, but face it, doll. The guy's *nuts*!"

"True, but Tom was with him, remember?"

"Okay. So what about Tom?"

"What about him?"

"I mean, Dirty Dick was bombed out of his mind and the piano music Passion Flowers says she heard may have been on tape. Dirty Dick has a tape recorder in his office. I noticed it when we signed the contracts. So, what was to stop Tom from tiptoeing back here while Dirty Dick was drunk and scragging the blonde?"

"Are you crazy, Randy," Regina snuffed. "Tom's a Negro!"

"So, Negros all gotta be good guys?"

"In this book they do. We can't have Tom turn out to be a killer. Not unless our publisher wants big trouble with the N.A.A.C.P.!"

"Okay. It'll have to be Pop Weezle, then. Unless you like another possibility."

"What's that?"

"That our original theory was right. That this Medusa cat Murgatroid Schnook was supposed to contact thought you were getting into the act and decided to kill you. Only he got the wrong chick when Voddie Ville changed the star on her door."

"Medusa, whoever he or she is, must have planned a double cross from the beginning . . ." Regina mused. "He acted as some sort of go-between for Murgatroid and this Senhor DeSilva. Then, when the meeting was set up, Medusa murdered DeSilva, taking the cash he'd brought,

and tried to murder Murgatroid, thinking the ex-British agent had been foolish enough to bring the plans for the Ha Ray along to the first contact point. That *still* doesn't explain why they stole Margatroid's body and tried to kidnap me."

"Maybe they figure that if the police are still looking for Murgatroid they'll have more freedom of action? And, as for kidnapping you, they must know, by now, that we've gotten our hands on Una Hu and her father's invention. The idea was to hold you for ransom and force me to deliver the plans."

"That holds water," Regina frowned. "But why, to get back to Voddie Ville, did they want to kill *me* in the first place?"

"Simple. They figured, if there was any of their kind of action in town, the Blue Queen would be sticking her pretty little nose in it before it was over. Medusa's a cold-blooded killer. Probably psycho to boot. And I knew a guy one time who had a neat trick when somebody challenged him to fairy chess."

"What was that, Randy?"

"He concentrated, right at the beginning, in knocking off the Blue Queen. That way, the game became much simpler."

"Brrr," shivered Regina. "I see what you mean. But Medusa must be utterly mad. We'd no intention of getting into the game when we arrived in Rio the other day."

"No," Randy smiled. "But we did, didn't we?"

Chapter EIGHT

"I'd LIKE to thank you," Passion Flowers was saying, as she and Randy stood alone in the dressing-room corridor, "for coming to my rescue this afternoon." She licked her lips and fluttered her eyelashes meaningfully as she toyed with a button on Randy's shirt and added, "Thank you *properly*, that is. Why don't we go to my hotel and get, ah, better acquainted?"

Randy looked at his watch. It was nearly four in the morning, it had been a hard night, and Una Hu was waiting for him in the greenroom. Still, there's such a thing as common courtesy. . . .

Una wasn't happy about it, but she went home alone in a taxi when Randy told her he had to do some legwork for the Blue Queen. Regina, he knew, was doing some legwork of her own at the moment. He wondered, idly, what the penalty for burglary was in Rio de Janeiro. Of course, they might not call it burglary. The place Regina was busting this morning *was* a bit unusual.

Passion Flowers was staying at a hotel near the Passeio Publico. Her pad was small but air-conditioned, with a nice view of Guanabra Bay to the east. The redhead mixed a couple of daiquiris and slithered down beside Randy on the overstuffed couch. The daiquiri was a little too sweet for Randy's more masculine taste buds. So was Passion Flowers. The redhead's perfume was sweet and overpowering. She was apparently given to overdoing a good thing. Her hair was too red to be in good taste. Her kimono, after she'd gone into the other room to "get comfy," was alarmingly transparent, and the panties and bra she wore under it were black lace.

Randy sipped his daiquiri, wondering if she would overdo things in bed. *That* he was looking forward to.

Suiting his actions to his thoughts, Randy drained his glass, put it on the end table, and reached for Passion Flowers. She'd been saying some damned thing or another but he wasn't listening and she stopped talking, anyway, as their lips met.

Passion Flowers kissed like a vacuum cleaner.

Their tongues tied in a lover's knot and Randy could feel her heart beating wildly as he held her melon-half breasts against his chest. He slid a hand up her back, inside the kimono, and started to unhook her brassiere.

"Please don't spoil things," Passion sobbed, pulling her mouth from his and pushing his hand away from where it was now headed.

"Oh?" Randy smiled thinly. "Then Pop was right about you being a P.T.?"

"It's nothing like that, darling," Passion Flowers panted. "I'm crazy about you and you do turn me on, but . . . Oh, you'd be so *cruel* if I told you. You'd raise that one eyebrow of yours and say something frightfully clever and I'd just curl up and *die*."

"You a Lesbian?" Randy tried.

Passion Flowers laughed, a wild maniacal laugh, as she ran her long nailed fingers through his hair and purred, "You've got to be kidding, darling! I *told* you what this is doing to me. Having you in my arms like this and not daring to go further is driving me simply *wild*!"

"Okay. You're not a P.T. and you're not a dyke," Randy pondered. "That leaves . . . Oh oh, wrong time, huh?"

"I knew you'd understand, darling," she sighed, kissing him on the neck. "Most men are so dense about feminine problems. But you're so . . . so understanding. I didn't know when I invited you up here, darling. It . . . it just started."

"We could always take a shower afterwards. . . ."

"Don't darling. Don't tempt me. Not the first time. I want to always remember the first time as something . . . something beautiful. Don't worry, Randy darling. I won't send you home frustrated. I like to give French lessons and it's the least I can do for the man I love."

"But what about you, doll? I mean, fun's fun, but a guy's got to draw a line somewhere and hemophilic cunnilingus just ain't my cup of tea."

"Let me be your slave. Your love slave! Oh, Randy, you're so . . . so masterful. Let me give you pleasure, master! Let me delight you with my lips. All over."

She did. And very nicely. Although, like everything else she did, Passion Flowers overdid it a bit. It was a weak and weary Randy Kidd who wandered home to his own pad, and Una Hu, at dawn.

The Eurasian girl stretched sleepily and sighed, "That you, lover? Oh, Randy, I missed you so and just now I had this wonderful dream!" She threw the sheet from her naked body and purred, softly, "Randy, darling. Make my dream come true!"

"Okay," Randy sighed. "But not more than once or twice, huh?"

It was pitch dark in the room, except for the little circle of light darting rapidly along the printed lines of a police dossier. The light came from a pencil flash in Regina's hand. The Blue Queen read fast, storing each and every word in her photographic memory cells. It would be daylight soon. The dawn was already breaking over Guanabra Bay, a single shaft of sunlight from below the horizon outlining the giant statue of Christ the Redeemer atop the craggy bulk of Corcavado. Regina didn't know what time Lieutenant DePussa usually got to his office in the morning but she hoped, sincerely, it wouldn't be early.

It was.

The lights flashed on and the lieutenant, from the doorway, almost blew his cool as he snapped something very

nasty in Portuguese. Then, his eyes lighting in sudden recognition, he said, mildly, "I deed not expect to find *you* here so early, Senhorita Regina."

"Nor I you, Lieutenant honey," Regina answered ruefully.

DePussa stared thoughtfully at the open file cabinet behind Regina and asked, "Are you lookeeng for sometheeng een particular, Senhorita? Or were you joost, how you say, browsing?"

"A little of both," Regina admitted.

"You always dress een a black sweater and slacks when you pay night veesets to police stations, Senhorita?"

"I didn't think you'd give me permission to peek," the Blue Queen purred. "I guess you think I'm a naughty girl."

"I theenk you are the Blue Queen. And I theenk you are compheateeng thees game more than you have to. I weel speak frankly, Senhorita. I know you are a spy and you know I am a policeman. Bot why can't we play on the same side?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we put the cards on the table, eh? You know theengs I weesh to know. Eet ees obvious *I* know theengs *you* weesh to know. I theenk, eef we put our heads together, eet would be of great profeet for both of us." He winked roguishly and added, "I also theenk eet might be great *fon*!"

"I agree completely with you, Lieutenant honey," Regina said. So, for the next hour or so, they lied to one another.

Of course, it wasn't all lies. The detective was too hip to con completely, and Regina *was* willing to trade a *few* facts.

She told him Murgatroid Schnook was dead, for instance. There was little reason to conceal the matter any longer. The people who'd stolen his stiff knew. Randy knew, and Una Hu knew. It seemed only fair the police should.

"We most tell I.C. Hands of thees!" the detective chortled.

"The British agent?"

"Si, he ees een the beeldeeng thees very moment. Tryeeng to identeefy those two men we found een the bay last night."

"You found two men? Anyone I know, Lieutenant honey?"

"Perhops. We theenk they may be the ones who attacked you een your room. One has a lacerated eyeball and the other a broken arm. Or I should say they *had* them, seence they are both dead, eh?"

"What killed them, drowning?"

"Boolets, Senhorita. Doomdoom boolets."

"It figures. The others in the gang either had to get them to a doctor or kill them. And doctors talk."

"Si, that ees the way we see eet. Would you care to have a look at them? Porhaps, between the three of os, workeeng together for a change, we could feegure out what een the hell ees goeeng on, no?"

"Si si, and all that jazz," nodded the Blue Queen.

Together, they went down to the police lab, where I.C. Hands was keeping company with a couple of corpses. Old I.C. was cheerful as ever, and the only way you could tell him from the two stiffs on the cold white tables was that they were lying down and I.C. Hands was standing up. He nodded gravely at Regina and then, speaking to the Brazilian detective, said, "I'm afraid, old boy, these two are not known international spies. At least, they're not known to British Intelligence."

"Pity," sniffed the Blue Queen in her ultra-U put on.

"We have taken feengerpreents," DePussa shrugged. "Eef they are een our files, we weel know as soon as they wire os from headquarters een Brazilia. Meanwhile, eef senhorita would be so good as to take the peek . . ."

Regina stepped closer and gazed down at the first. He was a burly mestizo of about forty, staring back at her with his one good eye, and that one was getting sort of

icky. A cruel scar ran along the angle of his unshaven jaw and his flattened nose spoke of a life of sudden violence. But, although acquainted with many knock-around types, Regina was sure she'd never seen him before. "He looks Brazilian," she said. "But I don't know him."

"How about this one?" I.C. Hands asked. "He might be more your type, wot?"

Regina walked around the end of the table and stood over the corpse with the broken arm. The one who'd been wearing the Medusa costume. He was a strikingly handsome though weak looking man. Also of obviously Latin features. He'd been shot twice in the chest.

"Not my type, I.C. Honey," the Blue Queen shrugged. "Even if he was alive."

"You knew him, then?"

"I knew him never. He doesn't look like any of the little old spies I've met in my time. And, I.C. Darling, I've met oodles and oodles of little old spies."

"Thees was found on the beach, near the bodies," said DePussa, holding up a soggy-looking papier-mâché mask. "You wed noteece eet ees the tace of a Gorgon. A Medusa. Fet may be that whoever has shot our young fran' has reed the world of the notorious hired assassin, Medusa, eh?"

"It doesn't scan, Lieutenant darling," Regina frowned. "For *why* eet does not scan?"

"For because this Medusa character's supposed to be the *boss* killer, Pao sweetums. These two hoods were obviously shot to keep them from talking. Ipso facto, the one who ordered them shot was higher up on the totem pole."

"There were *three* of them," I.C. Hands mused. "And it really would have been rather silly of the *real* Medusa to advertise his identity by wearing that mask. The chap in the death's head must have been the real Medusa."

"Or the real thing was waiting for all three of them on

the beach and, when two of them turned up injured, decided to eliminate them," Regina agreed.

Her theory was reinforced a few minutes later when a uniformed policewoman brought a wire in to DePussa. The lieutenant read it and smiled thinly as he explained, "Brazilia has identified them from their prints. They are both Brazilian nationals weeth long creeminal records. The older of the two was Harry Guerilla, a, how you say, union goon and part-time prize fighter. The younger was Estes Stupido, a geegelo, peemp, and like wot you Americanos call a stood booster."

"Stood booster?" Regina blinked. "You mean a stud buster?"

"I mean a young man who goes about peekeeng op the homosexuals and boosteeng them on the head for to take their wallets."

"How sweet," Regina grimaced. Then she shook her head in puzzlement and added, "But if both of them were such punks, they really must not have intended to kill me. I mean, petty criminals like these two are hardly the type you hire to really hit somebody. Didn't you say this Medusa was a for-real *killer*, I.C. doll?"

"A notorious killer, Miss Regina," I.C. Hands sniffed, with a disdainful glance at the two stiffs. "Hardly the type to work with such riffraff."

"Then who *did* send such riffraff to give me a hard time?"

It was a good question. Neither man had any answer worth considering. Regina cooperated with them for a bit, not really telling them very much and not learning anything she didn't already know, and then, feeling she'd soothed any feathers she may have ruffled by breaking into DePussa's office, left.

She got as far as the taxi stand outside police headquarters without incident. But then, getting into a taxi, it happened. The taxi was a low-slung sedan and, as Regina bent over to get in, something went, "Phhhhhhhht!" and some-

thing else plunked into Regina's posterior most painfully.

"Oh darn!" sighed the Blue Queen. "I seem to have been shot in the fanny with a dart. I hope it's not a *poison* dart." But, as she started back into the building, a watery weak feeling in her legs warned her that . . . it was!

Chapter NINE

Dirty Dick was having an argument with Passion Flowers when Randy Kidd arrived at the club that afternoon. He'd wanted to talk to Dirty Dick about their contract, but the club owner was drunk, as usual, and obviously annoyed as hell about something he and Passion were fussing about. Randy nodded to the pair of them and took a rain check on his own discussion as he continued on to his dressing room.

The man waiting for him was seated on a chair, backwards. His legs were spread out to either side, as if he was riding a horse, and both arms were crossed in front of him, on the back of the chair. He was dressed in a white linen suit and there was a pleasant smile on his clean-cut and handsome young face. But the pistol he held nonchalantly in one hand didn't seem so friendly. Not pointed at Randy's navel the way it was.

Randy paused in the doorway while he wondered how fast he could move out of the line of fire. Not quite as fast as a bullet, he decided. Smiling ruefully down at the equestrianoid young man, Randy said, "Dom Pedro, I presume?"

"DeSilva's my name, growing rubber is my game." The young man smiled. It wasn't really a pleasant smile, even when he wasn't pointing guns at people.

"DeSilva?" Randy frowned. "They told us you'd been murdered."

"My father," DeSilva answered bleakly. "He was keeled by your fran', Moorgatroid. And now I am goeeng to keel *you*! Bot forst, you weel tell me wot 'as happen to my seester, you mother!"

"You have a sister?" Randy answered, dully, while he stared down the barrel of the gun. His own P-38 nestled at his side in its special spring holster. He was fast on the draw, but not that fast. Still, if he could distract this nut for the tenth of a second he needed . . .

"Do not pretend, Senhor Keed!" DeSilva snapped. "You know my seester, Pauna, ees meesing seence the night our father was amboosh by the man weeth the Hu Ray."

"Your sister, Pauna DeSilva, was with your father when he went to buy the plans for the Hu Ray?"

"Do not play doom, Senhor. You know very well my poor pappacito came alone, weeth the money, to the place Senhor Schnook told heem to meet heem. And please do not try for the gon under your jacket, eh? I am very fast weeth a peestola and I do not weesh to keel you jost yet."

"I don't want you to kill me ever," Randy shrugged. Then he grinned and added, "Of course, it's hardly likely you came here with any intention of really killing anybody. You're bluffing, DeSilva, and we both know it!"

"Bloffeeng? *Who* ees bloffeeng? I weel show you who ees bloffeeng, you Yanqui bastardo!"

"With the safety on?" Randy laughed.

"Safety?" DeSilva blinked, dropping his eyes to the safety lever of his gun. A glance told him Randy Kidd had lied. The safety was not on and he could have fired, if there'd been time. But there was no time. The split second he'd taken his eyes off Randy were all the catlike American had needed to spring from the door and knock the pistol from his hand with a vicious backhand sweep of his left hand while he drew the Walther P-38 with the right and, still moving forward, pistol-whipped the young Brazilian across the face and onto the floor.

Randy kicked the Brazilian's pistol out of reach, placed a foot in the middle of DeSilva's chest as the latter tried

to sit up and, shoving the suddenly terrified youth flat on his back, aimed his own gun at a point midway between his eyeballs and seated himself in the same chair.

"I think," said Randy Kidd amiably, "I like things better this way, don't you?"

"I do not like them at all," DeSilva sighed. "Before you keel me, Senhor, weel you tell me jos' one theeng?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Wot have you done weeth my leetle seester?"

"I've never seen your little sister."

"Why do you conteenue thees farce, Senhor? Weel you not set my mind at rest before you blow out my brains? I only weesh to know Pauna ees alive and well before I die, damn you!"

"Let me get this straight," the American frowned. "You think that I was connected in some way with your father's death and your sister's disappearance?"

"I *know* you are connected weeth the Blue Queen," DeSilva pouted. "And that the Blue Queen ees connected weeth Moorgatroid Schnook and that Moorgatroid Schnook keeled my father!"

"Hold it right there, friend. Murgatroid told us that your father double crossed *him*!"

"Hah! Some double cross. My poor pappa was shot weeth a doomdoom boolet and robbed of hees gold!"

"So was Murgatroid Schnook, twice. And he never got his hands on your father's gold, either. You know, I think Medusa double crossed both of them!"

"Medusa?" DeSilva frowned. "Who ees thees Medusa?"

"I was hoping *you* could tell *me*. We sort of figured your father hired him to knock poor Schnook off and then, when it turned out that Schnook got away without giving them the plans, kept boring in after them."

"My father was honest beezness tycoon," DeSilva insisted. Then, catching Randy's cynical glance, quickly added, "At least, he never *keeled* nobody! And I would

have known eef he had had any dealeengs weeth thees Medusa you speak of."

"He might not have told you."

"Why not? He told my seester and me about the Hu Ray, deedn't he?"

"That sounds reasonable," Randy mused. "Possession of the Hu Ray would have given him a strangle hold on the rubber industry. While luring a killer or two would just put him in a class with the Westchester garbage industry. How long after your father's murder did your sister vanish?"

"That same night. Eet was my seester who found hees body. When Pappacito deed not come back from hees meeteeng weeth Moorgatroid Schnook, Pauna went lookeeng for heem. Eet was Pauna who found the body."

"*Just* the body?" Randy mused.

"What do you mean by that, Yanqui?"

"I mean, if little Pauna's daddy and Murgatroid smoked one another up, the *money* might have been the only side that came out in one piece. What if Murgatroid staggered off into the A.M. with a couple of slugs in him, leaving the loot lying by your father's body until Pauna showed up and . . . found it?"

"I steel do not see what you are getteeng at, Yanqui."

"I think you do. A couple of million bucks, all in one neat package, might have tempted little Pauna to take a trip on her own."

"Bastardo! You are saveeng my leetle seester would steal from her father's corpse?"

"I am saying a couple of million clams is a couple of million clams. Period."

"Pauna was a good girl," DeSilva insisted, starting to reach inside his jacket. Randy said, "Uh uh!" and waved the muzzle of his gun. But DeSilva said, "Ees only a paper I weesh to show you, Senhor."

"Bring it out very slow and easy," Randy nodded.

DeSilva did. It was, indeed, a single sheet of onionskin.

DeSilva handed it to Randy, who unfolded it and read:

Senhorita Pauna:

If you wish to know the identity of your father's murderer, come alone to the Passeio Publico at midnight.

M.

"I found thees een Pauna's room after she disappeared," the brother declared. "M stands for Moorgatroid, no?"

"Yeah, and it also stands for Medusa. You get any other notes signed M, chum?"

"None so far. You theenk, then, thees Medusa you speak so moch of ees the wan who has keednap my leetle seester?"

"It sure as hell couldn't have been Murgatroid. Schnook's dead. Died the same night he contacted us. How'd you know he *had* contacted us, by the way?"

"He was seen entereeng the Blue Queen's hotel. Later, you took a taxi to Ipanema and another contact told us Murgatroid Schnook had been stayeeng out there. Eet was not hard to feegure from there, eh?"

"Yeah, but you figured kooky, chum. Did you or your pals with the funny faces have anything to do with snatching Murgatroid's stiff?"

"Fonny faces? Who has a fonny face? The gorls from Ipanema theenk I have vorry *nice* face, Senhor. Of course, that was before you bost me een the mouth weeth a peestol, but . . ."

"Relax, I just scratched you up a little. You're still a very pretty boy. And I suppose you don't know a thing about those three creeps in Mardi Gras costume who busted in on the Blue Queen at her hotel, either?"

"I know lots of Cariocas wearing Mardi Gras costumes, Senhor. Bot I deed not send anybody after your fuend, the Blue Queen." He dabbed at the trickle of blood running down from one corner of his swollen mouth and

added, grimly, "I was going to keel her *myself*, after I got through weeth *you!*"

"Nice boy," Randy sighed. "How do we stand, now?"

"Pardon?"

"I said, how do we stand now? I've told you the Blue Queen and I had nothing to do with your father's death *or* your sister vanishing. I mean, we might all be better off if we worked *together* on this caper instead of fighting amongst ourselves the way this Medusa character obviously wishes us to."

DeSilva frowned thoughtfully up at Randy, and then he smiled engagingly and nodded. "I theenk you are right, Senhor Keed. Can I have my gon back?"

"Why not?" Randy shrugged, walking across the room and picking DeSilva's pistol up as he put his own back in its holster. He looked it over appreciatively as he walked back to DeSilva and said, "Nice little rosece," as he handed it back to its owner.

DeSilva didn't answer as he took the gun and got unsteadily to his feet. Randy raised an eyebrow and asked, "Don't we even say thank you?"

"We say, Yanqui," snarled DeSilva, pointing the muzzle once more at Randy, "that you weel die. Bot, forst, you weel tell me what you have done weeth my leetle seester!"

"Some guys just never learn," Randy sighed. "I *told* you the gun was on safety, dammit!"

"You lied," DeSilva sneered. "Bot *theez* time, dog of a Yanqui, eet weel not work. Theez time I know better than to take my eyes off you!"

"Yeah," Randy sighed, stepping forward as DeSilva's finger whitened on the trigger. He slapped the youth viciously with the back of his hand, cutting the other side of his mouth as he explained, amiably, "Only, *this* time, it was set on safe. I, uh, took the liberty of setting it for you before I handed it back!"

"How long can you guys hold this nut?" Randy was

asking the police sergeant as Lieutenant DePussa came into the room at police headquarters where Randy was swearing out a complaint against the still punchy Junior DeSilva. DePussa blinked in surprise at seeing the Blue Queen's sidekick and said, "I was joost going to send for you, Senhor Keed. What has hoppen to young DeSilva? He looks like he has been playceng een the traffeeck!"

"Tried to shoot me," Randy shrugged. "Twice. Like, I tried to reason with him, but he seems to think Regina and I had something to do with scragging his old man. You got a nice quiet cell he can cool off in for a while?"

"We have lots of cells, but he ees a DeSilva. One does not hold a DeSilva very long weethout a very fine reason."

"Let's just say that if he sticks his nose into my life again, I'm going to bust it off for him, Lieutenant. How does that grab you, as a reason for keeping him the hell out of my way?"

DePussa looked unhappy. He shrugged helplessly and said, "You most understand my posceeon, Senhor. As I have said, he ees a DeSilva."

"And you don't want to wind up pounding a beat in the Amazon Rain Forest, eh? Okay. How about just hanging onto him long enough for Regina and I to blow town, eh?"

"You weesh to leave Rio de Janeiro?" DePussa frowned. "Ees thees not a leetle sodden?"

"Yeah, and soon, too. We'll have to talk Dirty Dick into letting us break our contract, but it can't be helped. I can't have Regina standing up there on the podium with half the kooks in town taking potshots at her."

"I most, for once, agree weeth you, Senhor Keed," DePussa nodded. "Somebody took a, how you say, potshot at the Senhorita joost a short while ago. As she was right een front of thees very police station, een fact!"

"Somebody took a shot at Regina?" Randy gasped.

"Si, and they heet her!"

"She's been wounded?"

"Only very slightly. Somebody shot her weeth a poison dart as she was bendeeng over to get into a taxi. Fortunately, the poison was curare."

"Curare?" Randy blinked. "You mean that stuff the head-shrinking Jivaros smear on their darts? I thought that curare was a deadly dart poison!"

"Eet ees, for a bord or a monkey. The Jivaros do not use eet on their enemies, except een the Hollywood peectures. When a Jivaro wants to *keel* sombody, he uses hees machete."

"But won't curare kill you, if you get enough of it in your bloodstream?"

"Sure. So weel *water* eef you get *enough* of eet," DePussa shrugged. "Bot the amount of eet you can eenject on a wooden dart ees only enough to make you, how you say, woozy. Besides, every nateeve een the jungle knows the antidote. That ees wan reason we sell so much salt to the Jivaros."

"Salt? You sell salt to them as an antidote?"

"Oy, do we sell salt! Only they use eet more for the cookeeng of parrots than for to take care of curare een the blood. Like I hov joost said, nobody shoots nobody weeth the stoff, except een the movies."

"Yeah, well what about here in Rio? *Somebody* shot Regina with a dart dipped in the stuff, didn't they?"

"Tourists," shrugged DePussa. "No Carioca would have been so estupido. Besides, eef young DeSilva, here, was tryeeng to keel *you* at the time, he could not have been the wan who tried to keel Senhorita Regina, no?"

"That sounds reasonable," Randy shrugged. "Where's Regina right now?"

"Opstairs, resteeng. She was very deestorbed at being shot een so undeegneefied a place, eh? Bot, rest assured, Senhor Keed, she ees een no danger. Jost fool of salt water."

"Can you hold this joker long enough to let us get out of town?" Randy asked.

DePussa frowned and said, "I have not feeneesh my

investigation of thees case, Senhor. There are several murders to conseeder."

"Not as many as there'll be if we stick around. Besides, you know as much as we do and there's no way of pinning the murders of Fallingham, Voddie Ville, or DeSilva on either of us."

"There was the man keeled at the beach, and Senhor Schnook."

"Schnook's dead?" Randy asked, innocently.

"You bet your bord he ees, and you *know* eet! Along weeth two of the men who attacked the Blue Queen een her room. Mamma mia, I had *better* allow you to leave, while there are steel some people *alive* een thees town!"

He looked at the unhappy young DeSilva and asked, "Eef I hold thees yong hothead overnight, weel you have time to make your, how you say, getaway?"

"I hope so. Dirty Dick might raise a fuss about our cutting out early, but . . ."

"One night ees all I can geeve you, Senhor. As eet ees, I am steek my neck out to hold a DeSilva even that long!"

Stalling, Randy said he'd have to talk it over with Regina and, as they were installing the somewhat battered Brazilian in a luxury cell with a view of Sugarloaf, DePussa took him up to the police infirmary where Regina was recovering from her close brush with death.

"Good thing I work with my clothes on," the Blue Queen cracked as she filled Randy in on what had happened to her whilst bending over. "I've a black-and-blue mark where I sit that you wouldn't believe if you saw it!"

"Oh, I don't know," Randy smiled. "Why don't you show it to me and I'll tell you if I believe it or not."

"Down, boy. Haven't you enough to keep you busy, between Passion Flowers and . . . your other girlfriend?"

"You mean U . . . oops?" Randy smiled, remembering they were not alone just in time to avoid saying Una Hu aloud. If DePussa caught the almost slip, he didn't let on, and DePussa liked to point out how cotton-pick-

ing smart he was. Before he could slip again, Randy decided to button up until he and Regina were safely seated in the taxi and en route to the club.

"I hope," Regina sighed, "Dirty Dick won't make a federal case out of our leaving early like this. But I *was* looking for a good excuse to get, ah, our little friend and her toy to that certain place in Hollywood."

"He might let *us* go," Randy mused, staring out as a screaming fire engine roared past. "But he's liable to ask some funny questions about losing his new go go dancer so suddenly."

"It can't be helped," Regina shrugged. "We have to take Una, I mean, Wiggles Goode, with us, or there's little point in *our* going."

"Couldn't we just take the, ah, papers?"

"And double cross the girl?"

"Why not?"

"Randy, sometimes I think you have absolutely no principles."

"I got over them, along with acne, by the time I was old enough to vote, kitten. And you'll have to admit, a chick like her nibs sort of stands out. She might slow us down and she can't speed us up. Besides, I like the way the money splits when you divide it by two."

"But it's her invention!"

"She says."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we don't know it is. What if she's not who she says she is? I mean, suppose the *real* daughter went up in smoke with her daddy and the lab?"

"It's possible. But whatever gave you such a dumb idea?"

"It's not a dumb idea. It's smart. And so's Lieutenant DePussa. You remember he said he was *looking* for the chick? Well, unless he's blind as a bat, he should have recognized her when he saw her in my doorway the other night!"

"Hmmm, I see what you mean! You think, then, that

she's an impostor who somehow fooled Murgatroid Schnook?"

"Why not? Or why couldn't she and Murgatroid been in on it together? They took the Chincoms for a bundle, remember? And they were going to take DeSilva for another. In fact, they may just have done that very thing! How do we know Murgatroid didn't shoot and rob DeSilva and then get double crossed by his own chick?"

"He asked *us* to *protect* her!" Regina objected.

"Okay. So he didn't know she was the one who'd put those dumdums in him. If a guy's in love with a chick, he might not see things as clearly as he should, especially full of lead."

"That's what I like about you, Randy," Regina sniffed. "You have so much faith in human nature. Especially female human nature."

"A guy knocks around, a guy learns," Randy shrugged.

They were turning onto the Avenida Rio Branco, now, and, up ahead, the street was crowded with stalled vehicles and a milling herd of Cariocas gathering on the striped sidewalks and tripping over the many fire hoses snaking hither and yon. A dense billowing cloud of black smoke hovered over the spot they'd been headed for and, even before Regina caught sight of the hook-and-ladder blocking the intersection in front of Dirty Dick's she gasped, "There's a fire, Randy. The club's on fire!"

"Yeah," Randy frowned. "Looks like a big one. Looks like we won't have to beg Dirty Dick to let us out of our contracts after all. Looks like there won't be any Dirty Dick's Discotheque for us to *have* contracts with!"

Chapter TEN

"He wouldn't listen," Tom was saying, his face ashen under its usual darkness as he explained how Dirty Dick had run back into the burning club despite every effort to hold him. "He had this scrapbook in his office and it wan't 'til we was out on the street he remembered and went back to save her."

"Her?" Lieutenant DePussa frowned. "I thought you said he went back for to save a scrapbook?"

"Same deal, man," Tom shrugged. "The scrapbook was all full of pictures of Ingrid Bergman, and he . . ."

"Have your boys located Pop Weezle yet?" Randy Kidd cut in, interupting the interrogation being held in Tom's apartment near the burned-out shell that the fire had left after burning out Dirty Dick's Discotheque. Most of the performers and staff of the club were there. Most, but not all. Dirty Dick had perished amid the flames and Pop Weezle seemed to be missing.

Regina was spared the trouble of telling the Brazilian police about his activities in the States when Passion Flowers said, "Pop was accused of playing with matches at a certain Burly-Q in the Midwest."

"We know thees, Senhorita Flowers," DePussa nodded, with a grim little smile. "We also know that eet was *you*, Passion Flowers, who accused heem of the dirty deed! Tell me, Senhorita, where were *you* when the club caught fire?"

"Why I . . . I was with Tom, at the bar! Isn't that right, Tom?"

"Yeah," Tom frowned. "An', now that I thinks about it, that's the first time I ever seen you take a drink, Miss

Flowers! How come you came outta you' dressin' room all fussin' and fumin' like you done fussed and fumed?"

"I had a little spat," Passion Flowers shrugged.

"With Dirty Dick?" asked Una Hu, alias Wriggles Goode, in a sweetly innocent voice.

Passion Flowers shot her a murderously pleasant smile and answered, "You know as well as I do what we were fighting about, you little tramp!"

"Perhaps," sighed the lieutenant, "you might care to tell *me* what eet was about, Senhorita?"

"It was professional," Passion Flowers sniffed. "Dirty Dick wanted me to dance this evening without my bra. This . . . this brazen little *gook*, here, had agreed to peel off her pasties and he thought I seemed overdressed in my g-string and bra!"

"Over . . . *dressed?*" blinked the detective with an incredulous smile.

"Yes, those are the exact words he used! I mean, can you *imagine?* Anyhow, I *did* have words with him about it."

"You refused?"

"I *tried* to refuse. But, what was a girl like I to do? I mean, Dirty Dick *was* the *boss*, wasn't he? I said I'd do it, but I wouldn't like it. I've *never* stripped all the way and, well, I felt unhappy about it. That's why I decided to get drunk. *Some* girls *like* to expose themselves to a lot of dirty old men. But *I'd* have to be bombed out of my mind to dance topless!"

"I see," nodded DePussa, "and so you and Senhor Tom were together when the fire broke out?"

"Regina . . ." Randy whispered, as Tom verified her alibi, "are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I don't know, lover. What are you thinking?"

"That it was Passion Flowers who alibied Tom, last killing, and now Tom's alibiing her for *this* one!"

"We don't know it's a *killing*, Randy. Dirt Dick wouldn't have died if he hadn't run back into the building for his scrapbook."

"Yeah? You ever *see* this scrapbook?"

"Of course not. What are you getting at?"

"How do we know there was one?"

"There had to be. Otherwise, why would Dirty Dick have run back into the flames?"

"How do we know he *did?*"

"Tom says he did and . . . Hmmm, I think I see what you mean, but the N.A.A.C.P. isn't going to *like* this!"

"Senhorita Regina and Senhor Keed were weeth *me*, when the fire started," DePussa mused. "An' so that more or less eeleeminates *them* from our leest of suspects. Where were *you* when eet started, Senhorita Goode?"

Una Hu blinked as her alias was called and answered, "I was in my dressing room."

"Backstage, where the fire started?"

"I'm afraid so," the girl answered in a small scared voice.

"Een that case," sighed DePussa, "I am afraid I weel have to hold you for the time being."

"On what charge?" cut in Randy Kidd.

"On suspeecian of arson weeth murder," frowned DePussa.

"You jerk," Randy laughed. "Where'd you get your little tin badge? From a box of breakfast food? Why aren't you out looking for the *real* firebug?"

"And who ees thees real firebog?"

"Pop Weezle. Who else? He was suspected of starting a fire in the States, and he's the only person working at the club who didn't show up for questioning."

"Bot, Senhorita Goode has no alibi."

"So what? Does Pop?"

"Hmmm, I theenk I see what you are getteeng at. Okay. I weel not hold Senhorita Goode, yet. Bot she most not leave the town, eh?"

"But Randy," Una Hu wailed. "You promised to take me to Hollywood!"

"Hollywood?" DePussa frowned.

"Randy always promises girls he's going to take them

to Hollywood, the louse," Regina explained, with a warning look to Una Hu. "He's used that line so many times you'd think they'd get wise."

"It works, don't it?" shrugged Randy with a sheepish little grin as Una Hu, catching on, covered her slip by exclaiming, "Randy Kidd, you dirty rat, you said you were gonna put me in movin' pitchers! You mean to tell me all this time it was nothin' but a big old line?"

"Yeah," Randy grinned. "Worked pretty good, didn't it?"

"You, you beast!" Una Hu hollered, slapping his face. She slapped hard and Randy, grabbing her wrist, whispered, "You're padding your part, doll!"

"No, I'm *not!*" she whispered back. "Passion Flowers *told* me where you were the other night, you louse!"

"There weel be no more of thees!" Pao DePussa cut in, pulling Una Hu away from Randy and giving her a soothing little pat on her, ah, shoulder.

As DePussa soothed Una Hu, Regina got Randy off to one side and whispered, "*Where*, by the way, *were* you, you louse? I mean, I thought you were supposed to be taking care of Baby Jane."

"I am. I mean I was, only I had a sort of, ah, date with Passion Flowers. We went to her pad near the Passeo Publico and . . ."

"The Passeo Publico? Isn't that where Pauna DeSilva vanished?"

"Come to think of it, it was."

"But if you were with Passion Flowers . . . Nuts, that lets out *another* idea I had. I take it, then, that you and Passion Flowers became . . . good friends?"

"A gentleman," Randy sniffed, "never discusses his sex life with others."

"I know, but, since you're not a gentleman, I take it we can rule Passion Flowers out as far as the DeSilva girl's abduction goes."

"You take it right. Oh oh, cheese it, the cops."

DePussa was coming over their way again. The detec-

tive smiled and said, "As of the moment, we are leesteeng eet as a fire of undetermeened oreegin, Senhorita Regina. You weel be leaveeng os on the eveneeng flight for North America?"

"If it's okay with you, detective honey."

"Eet ees very okay weeth me," DePussa sighed. "Perhops, weeth Moorgatroid Schnook dead and the Blue Queen on her way someplace else, Rio can settle down again, eh? Eet weel be so restful to only worry about murder, arson, and rape once again!"

"I'll be on that same plane," Tom said. "I got a job lined up in Chi, playin' piano in a house of ill repute."

"You were eentendeeng to leave Rio?" DePussa frowned. "I thought you were, how you say, devoted to Senhor Deek!"

"Devoted?" Tom frowned back. "Man, you gotta be kidding! Do-Jesus, how many times a day do you think he had me boppin' that same damn song on the piano? I like to went outta my cotton-pickin' mind, waitin' fo' Ingrid Bergman with that kook!"

"In that case, Senhor Tom," DePussa said. "I theenk we weel ask you to stay here in Rio unteel we feeneesh our eenvestigation!"

"Oh yeah?" Tom blustered. "We'll see what the American consulate has to say about this! I got my rights, baby. You ain't up *North*, you know!"

Regina and Randy left them, still fighting about whether Tom was going to be allowed to leave or not. As they were going out the door, Randy nodded to Una Hu and the Eurasian girl quietly slipped out behind them. If DePussa noticed, he didn't say anything.

"Knew a lot of guys like that in the army," Randy mused. "Didn't know enough not to ask if they could leave the company area. Like, us wise-money boys used to just up and *go!*"

"Let's grab a cab and *go*, then," Regina agreed. She turned to Una Hu and added, "how long will it take you to pick up your passport and the Hu Ray, Una honey?"

"No time at all," Una answered. "I've got them both in my purse."

"That simplifies things," Regina smiled. She waited until they were out on the curb and flagged down a taxi. They got in and Regina told the driver to take them to the airport.

"Aren't we going to pick up our luggage?" Randy blinked.

"Have you got your passport and gun?"

"Sure."

"Then that's all the luggage you need, Randy-wandy. You can pick up a toothbrush in the States."

"What's the rush? You told DePussa we were leaving on the evening flight, doll!"

"Yes, and if Medusa, or one of his agents, was in that room, he, she, or it, will be expecting us to do just that."

"Hmmmm," hmm'd Randy. "I see what you mean. I hate the thought of giving up my brand new dinner jacket, though."

"As much as you hate the thought of seeing it covered with blood? *Your* blood?"

"I didn't say I wasn't coming, did I?"

There was something familiar about the rear view of the stewardess on the afternoon flight out of Rio de Janeiro. Randy studied her, as she slithered up and down the aisle with pillows, chewing gum, vomit bags, and other goodies, and then he placed her. She was the girl from the Mile-High Club. He hadn't recognized her, right away, with her clothes on.

Most men, seated as Randy was between two gorgeous girls, would have been content to let it go at that. But Randy Kidd was not most men. Besides, it was going to be a long trip, and neither Regina nor Una Hu had access to the little private room down at the end of the passenger compartment.

Excusing himself with some muttered nonsense about the john, Randy followed the stewardess down the aisles,

breathing warmly on the back of her neck, but not grabbing until they were past the cabin bulkhead.

"Please, Clyde," the girl whispered, over her shoulder. "Not until we reach 15,000 feet!" Then, sensing a certain expertise in Randy's caress, she added, "10,000?"

"I can wait if you can, doll," Randy grinned.

The girl turned her head farther and blinked. "You're not Clyde!"

"Are you complaining?"

"It's against the rules to admit *passengers!*" she replied.

"Whose rules? The airline's rules or the Mile-High Club's rules?"

"You know about the Mile-High Club?"

"A member in good standing," Randy lied.

"Oh well, in that case . . ." The stewardess shrugged, opening the door to the crew members' lounge.

There was another stewardess seated on the couch, a blonde. She wore panties and bra and a puzzled expression as her friend came in and introduced Randy as a fellow member of the club.

"He's cute," the blonde frowned, "but I've never flown with him. What line are you with, Honey?"

"Any line that'll get me where I'm going," Randy smiled, unbuttoning his shirt and locking the door behind him.

"We were supposed to wait for Clyde," the girl who'd brought him to the party objected.

"More cozy this way," Randy grinned, slipping out of his clothes with amazing speed. The blonde grinned roguishly and asked, "Cozy for us or cozy for you, handsome? Do you think you're man enough for ménage à trois?"

"Always have been so far," Randy shrugged, and, since this is a family-type publication, we now draw a delicate curtain on the sordid scene that takes place for what would have been the next few paragraphs.

Chapter ELEVEN

"THAT SURE took you a long time," Una Hu sniffed as Randy came back to his seat between her and Regina. The Blue Queen made no comment. She'd recognized the stewardess, too, and, knowing Randy, questions were not needed.

"Guess who's up front, near the wings?" Randy asked, trying to change the subject.

"Passion Flowers?" Regina answered, coolly.

"You saw her getting on?" Randy blinked.

"No, but nobody else in the world has hair that red. I've been wondering how long it would take you to notice her from here."

"Randy's been too busy to notice any female *passengers*," Una Hu hissed in a miffed tone.

Randy raised an eyebrow and thought about this revolting development. Una Hu was complicating his life outrageously with her unreasonable jealousy. You'd think she had some kind of claim on him, for Pete's sake. All he'd done was sleep with her for a couple of nights and she acted like they were lovers or something!

He waited until Una had gone to the ladies' room before voicing his unhappy thoughts to Regina. The Blue Queen nodded sympathetically but added, "Try to be nice to her, Randy, at least until we deliver her to RAPE."

"I'll try, but it ain't gonna be easy. I mean, she acts like I'm her boyfriend or something."

"Women are too possessive," Regina agreed. "But it's only for a little while. Once we deliver Una and the Hu

Ray and get our cut of the pie, you'll be free to ravage all the girls you want."

"*All* of them?" Randy leered, leaning over and placing a hand on Regina's . . . knee.

"Down, boy!" the Blue Queen purred, digging her nails affectionately into the back of his hand. She didn't quite draw blood this time. Randy was getting used to her foolish insistance on their remaining business associates.

"You're *sure* this is as far as Selma Avenue goes?" Randy Kidd was asking the cab driver as he frowned out at the passing landscape of limp-wristed lads. He was alone in the cab, having left Regina and Una Hu at a hotel in downtown Los Angeles while he cased the layout at RAPE. Only, unless he was blind, or the totally strange cab driver he'd picked at random in Figueroa Street was party to some insane international plot, there didn't seem to *be* any Research and Progressive Education foundation on Selma Avenue. Only frame houses and fairies. *Not* the kind you find in the bottom of your garden.

"You say this place we're looking for is called RAPE?" the cab driver asked, as he made a U turn and headed back into Hollywood for another strafing pass on the Land of Fruits and Nuts.

"That's what they *said* they called it," Randy replied weakly.

"Sure is a funny name for a place on Selma Avenue," the driver volunteered. "I mean, Selma's the last street in H-Wood you'd expect to find any kind of rape. At least, the usual kind of rape. Of course, I wouldn't want my little *brother* hopping down by the unemployment office after dark, but . . ."

"Maybe I've got the street wrong," Randy mused. "Are there any other streets in Hollywood with similar names?"

"On the main drag? Neh. Maybe up in the hills. They got all sorts of streets running around through the chaparral like spaghetti. Might be a street with a name

like Selma back up there in them there hills but, if there is, I never heard of it. And, like, I been driving this hack a long time."

"May as well take me back downtown," Randy shrugged. "I'm not going to find what I'm looking for on Selma Avenue."

"Could have told you that," the driver laughed. "You look like the kind of guy that likes *dames*."

Randy didn't answer as he stared miserably out at the passing palms waving at him. There were some trees waving, too. The driver waited until they were crossing Vermont before he asked, "You do like dames, don't you? On account of there's this bar near Fifth and Hill where I can fix you up with this certain party who . . ."

"I've got two dames waiting at my hotel," Randy sighed.

He was wrong. There were three. But he didn't know it, yet.

"You're sure you checked every address on Selma Avenue?" Regina frowned, when Randy came back to the hotel with the doleful news.

"Three times," Randy replied. "If RAPE has office space on the third floor of a boarding house, I'd know about it, if they had a sign on the door."

"Maybe they don't," Regina mused. "Maybe they've changed the name or decided to go underground. I imagine they've gotten sort of tired of the cute kind of cracks people must have made about the original name."

"They're not listed in the yellow pages," the tall piano-playing spy frowned. "Or any other pages, for that matter. Do you think Murgatroid conned us?"

"Why?" the Blue Queen asked. "What was the sense in his having us bring Una Hu and the Ha Ray all the way to RAPE, here in Hollywood, if there wasn't any RAPE in Hollywood?"

"That's a good question," Randy nodded. "I think I'll ask."

"How can you? The last time I saw Murgatroid, he was spattered all over the bottom of a twenty-story drop!"

"Una might know more than she's telling. Speaking of Una, where *is* Una?"

"In her room, I hope," Regina answered. "I told her not to go out until you got back."

"I'll check with her, then," Randy nodded. "She may have heard something from Murgatroid she's overlooked in telling us about their relationship."

The Blue Queen arched an eyebrow roguishly as she wondered if there could be anything Randy didn't know about the Eurasian girl by this time. But she didn't comment. There could be something *mental* her sidekick hadn't gotten around to probing.

Randy stepped out into the hall, noticing a swishy-looking young man in a dirty sweatshirt, a beard, and long hair garlanded with daffodils coming down the corridor about six inches above the floor. Randy tried to step around him but the flower child buttonholed Randy and lisped, "Are you a lover or a killer, cool daddy?"

"That depends," Randy sighed. "I'm liable to kill *you*, if you don't take your greasy-grimies off the threads!"

"You . . . you Philistine!" the flower child lisped angrily. "I could just *smite* you!"

"You've got the equipment for smiting Philistines," Randy smiled. "Like, you've got the jawbone of an ass."

"If I wasn't a creature of love," the Philistine-smiting flower child sniffed, "I'd find it easy to just *hate* you!"

"Likewise, I'm sure," Randy shrugged, prying himself loose from the weirdo and continuing on his way. Another flower child came by in sandals and a burlap loincloth. He didn't speak to Randy but looked sadly at the man in the square threads as he went his way, carrying a sign that read: SUPPORT PEACE OR I'LL KILL YOU!

"Strange things are happening," Randy said to a harassed-looking bellhop passing with a worried expres-

sion and a pitcher of ice water. The bellhop nodded and explained, "Convention of peacenicks. The hotel's crawling with them."

"Didn't know flower children could afford a middle-class dump like this."

"You and me both," the bellhop shrugged. "But this bunch can. They just checked in. Couple of dozen of them, at any rate. They say, down at the desk, that their leader's a dame. Nice-looking young chick with an accent of some kind."

Randy thanked the bellhop with a smile and a quarter and continued to Una Hu's room. He'd pointed out it was a needless expense, in view of her possessive nature, to check her into her own separate room. But the Blue Queen had vetoed his suggestion for more intimate arrangements and checked them into three separate rooms. Una's was two doors down from Randy's own pad. A most inconvenient setup unless, of course, he made friends with some of the other ladies on his floor.

Una was not in. Regina had told her to stay put. But, apparently, she hadn't.

So now they were missing not only RAPE but Una Hu and, presumably, the Hu Ray. Just to make sure, Randy searched Una Hu's room. There wasn't much to see. The Eurasian girl had left Rio without picking up any luggage. There were a couple of dresses she'd picked up in L.A. hanging in the closet and a zillion movie fan magazines scattered around the room. Otherwise, nothing. No Una, and no Hu Ray plans. Randy picked up the house phone, got Regina on the line, and told the Blue Queen about this latest revolting development.

"She may have just stepped out," Regina answered hopefully.

"Not for a magazine," Randy growled. "She's got every goddam movie magazine on the stands and I don't think she reads anything else."

Regina told him to sit tight for the time being and Randy signed off. There being nothing much to do at

the moment, and with evening coming on, he decided to ankle back to his own pad and shower and shave.

It wasn't easy.

The hall was filled with flower children.

Lots of flower children. Randy wondered where in the blue blazes they'd all come from. And, more important, how they were going to pay their hotel bills. Most of them looked like a bath, a warm meal, and a clean set of underwear would bankrupt if not kill them. A weirdo in long blond braids and a handlebar mustache threw its arms around Randy and sighed, "Kiss me, square daddy!"

"You're not my type," sighed Randy, gently shoving a thumb in the hippy's eye. He stepped over it and continued, only to be accosted by two teeny-boppers in miniskirts and long lank oddles of hair. One of them carried a sign proclaiming her to be a member of the Pasadena Anti-Bomb League's Emergency Meeting, PABLEM for short. Her friend carried no sign but was hovering three inches off the floor in a cloud of marijuana smoke. Randy took the reefer from between her slack lips and frowned, "What's a joint like this doing in a nice girl like you?"

"You're so masterful!" the hopped up hippess happily hollered. "Take me, I'm yours!"

"Aren't you a little young?"

"I'm nearly fourteen, lover, and I'm on the pill. I swipe them from my big sister's purse!"

"That's nice. How old's your big sister, fifteen?"

"Going on sixteen. You wouldn't like her, she's got stretch marks."

Randy shuddered, started to go around the teeny-bopper, and then, struck by a sudden thought, stopped and parted the hair hanging over her head. She was homely. Randy placed the hair gently back over her face and said, "Sorry. You're too young."

A frantic-looking mulatto of indeterminate sex came careening down the hall, bouncing a sign off of people's heads. The murderously swinging sign read: STOKELY

CARMICHAEL IS A TOM! and its wielder looked Like he/she/it meant it. Fortunately for all concerned, Randy was able to make it to his door without having to defend himself, or his head, from the madly swinging placard. He ducked inside, bolted the door behind him and muttered, aloud, "Man, this place is really zonked out!"

"I fancy I rather agree with you, old boy," a voice sighed from inside his room. Slowly Randy turned, ready for anything.

"Don't be an ass, Kidd," the voice said. "If I meant you the slightest harm I'd have potted you as you came through the door, what?"

Sheepishly Randy took his hand out of his jacket, leaving the P-38 in its shoulder holster, and said, "Mr. I.C. Hands, I presume?"

The British secret agent nodded, icily as always, from where he was seated in a stiff-looking straight-back chair near the window. "I've been waiting for you a deucedly long time, old man," I.C. sniffed.

"How'd you get in here?" Randy asked, crossing the rug to pour a brace of drinks from the bottle of Scotch on his dresser.

"We have our ways," I.C. sniffed. Randy sniffed back and handed him a drink as he observed, "Celluloid between the door jamb and the latch, huh?"

"Does that work?" I.C. blinked. "Have to make a note, what? Costs much more to bribe bellhops in this country, you know."

"I know. What can I do for you and Her Majesty, old chum?"

"I am authorized," said I.C., sipping at his drink with a critical lip, "to go as high as three million pounds. I say, this *is* rather good Scotch, you know."

"Your neighbors to the North export their best stuff to the colonies," Randy agreed. "Any particular reason you're trying to give us three million pounds, or is Her Majesty having second thoughts about lend lease?"

"Let's not dwell on painful subjects," I.C. muttered.

"I am prepared to pay any reasonable amount, up to three million everloving quid, for the plans and specifications of the Hu Ray."

"What's England going to do with the Hu Ray?"

"Really, Mr. Kidd. I hardly think it's any business of yours, is it? I mean, we are on the same side, what?"

"Not lately. But I suppose you're as much on our side as Russia is and even more so than France. You say three million *pounds*, not dollars?"

"Tax-free," I.C. Hands nodded.

"I'll have to talk it over with my business associates," Randy shrugged.

"You mean the Blue Queen and Una Hu?" I.C. said, permitting himself a slight smile. It was a statement, not a question. But Randy managed to look almost innocent as he replied, "Una Hu? Who's Una Hu?"

"I believe the Brazilian authorities knew her as Wiggles Goode, Mr. Kidd. Oh, yes, we knew all along who she was. She *did* meet Murgatroid Schnook in the Crown Colony of Hong Kong, you know."

"And you didn't tell De Pussa?"

"That would have been snitching. Besides, we British Intelligence agents never bother our pretty little heads about mundane matters like murder, arson, and etcetera. As a matter of fact, we rather went out of our way to help you get her to America, you know."

"I know," Randy nodded. "I was wondering why, if De Pussa was looking for Una Hu, he didn't recognize her when I introduced them. You switched her photographs, eh?"

"Switched her photographs? How unethical! Of course we did no such thing!"

"Then how come, if De Pussa saw the real pictures of the real Una Hu . . ."

"What makes you think," I.C. Hands cut in, "there *were* any photographs? Una Hu was not a wanted criminal, you know."

"Then nobody *has* any photographs of her?"

"No recent ones. Although we have a rather adorable snapshot taken of little Una at the age of twelve, and . . ."

"Then isn't it possible . . . that the girl we all know as Una Hu, daughter of the late Professor Hu of Saigon and all around good guy type scientist is . . . *not* Una Hu?"

"I suppose anything is *possible*, old bean. But if she's not Una Hu, who is she? And more important, where is Una Hu? The real Hu, I mean?"

"Hmmmm," Randy hmm'd. "You may have something there."

"I have? Good lord, tell me what it is."

"If there were two Hus," Randy explained, "we'd wind up with an extra one. Or at least, an extra Oriental-type chick. Since we haven't, it's safe to assume Una Hu is, in fact, the only Hu who's here."

"Unless she killed the other one," I.C. Hands nodded.

"In Hong Kong? That would make her a British agent, wouldn't it?"

"Or a Red Chinese. Hong Kong's rather close to China, you know. *In* China, as a matter of fact."

"But . . . why?"

"Why indeed? To steal the Hu Ray from Murgatroid Schnook."

Randy shook his head and objected, "Won't scan, I.C. In the first place, if Una stole the Hu Ray from Schnook, she'd hardly have to come all the way to Hollywood by way of Brazil if she was only a few steps away from the Chinese border."

"She would if she was a *Russian* spy."

"Still won't hold water. You're forgetting that Murgatroid didn't invent the Ray, it was Una Hu's father, Hu, who invented the Hu Ray. So Una Hu must be a Hu. Otherwise she couldn't have given the Hu Ray to Murgatroid who arranged to sell it to just about everybody."

"I say," said I.C. Hands. "We're right back where we started."

"Yeah. You ever hear of an organization called RAPE?"

"Organization? I thought rape was an Anglo-Saxon verb. Anglo-Norman, actually. Old Middle English used a more pungent phrase."

"I am speaking," spake Randy, "of the Research and Progressive Education-type RAPE."

"Oh," I.C. Hands nodded brightly. "*That* organization?"

"Yeah."

"Never heard of it."

"You're sure?"

"Only fools are positive."

"Oh? Are you certain only fools are positive?"

"I'm positive."

"Well, that settles that."

"Settles what? That there is no such organization as RAPE?"

"No, that you're a fool."

I.C. Hands frowned and muttered, "I did not come here to be insulted, Mr. Kidd. I take it you are not interested in making three million pounds?"

"I'm interested. But I'm more interested, at the moment, in a shave and a shower. Like, if I'm to deliver Una Hu and the Hu Ray, either to RAPE or Her Majesty, I'd better get dressed."

"Why? Going somewhere?"

"Yeah, out. To find Una Hu."

Chapter TWELVE

HAVING CLOSED the door behind the uffish I.C. Hands, Randy went into the bathroom, stripped to the waist, and started to shave. He'd wasted a lot of precious time talking to the British agent and there didn't seem to be any hot water. He didn't like the idea of going out without taking a shower. There was no telling who he might meet. But he didn't like the idea of a cold shower, either. Randy Kidd did not believe in cold showers, even to get clean.

"So, I'll use plenty of cologne," he shrugged, lathering up his face and looking for a fresh blade. There didn't seem to be any fresh blades in the john. The tall spy remembered the fresh pack in the overnight bag he'd picked up in New York on their way from Rio de Janeiro to the West Coast. Still lathered up, he walked into the other room and opened his closet door.

"Hell . . . o!" he grinned.

The girl grinned back. She was young, nicely stacked, and had taffy-colored hair, all over. This was no idle conjecture on Randy's part, as when he opened the door she was standing there in the altogether. Naked as a plucked jaybird.

Demurely, the maiden blushed and reached for something to cover her nakedness. The only something she could find seemed to be a large rectangle of pasteboard, a placard from the hippy convention convening in the hall. It had a ban-the-bomb emblem on it and read: I AM A HUMAN BEING. DO NOT FOLD, SPINDLE, OR MUTILATE.

"I'll buy that," Randy said gallantly.

"Oh, kind sir!" the girl sighed in a Latin accent that failed to jibe with her light coloring and auburn hair. "You must hide me!"

"The door's locked, honey." Randy smiled. "Who are you hiding from?" It was needless to point out that whoever she was hiding from, she wasn't hiding much from *him!* The girl stepped out of the closet, still holding the sign in front of her with becoming modesty. Randy, a gentleman of the old school, did not wish to embarrass her. So he did not point out that there was a mirror on the open bathroom door behind her. A full-length mirror.

"I am Felicidad Derrier," the girl said, "But eef you are my fran' you may call me what my fran's call me. My, how you say, neekname, eet ees *Fifi!*"

"Fifi Derrier, eh?" Randy nodded. "It figures."

"They weel keel me!" the girl whimpered. "They weel skeen me alive! As you see, they have already taken all my clothes!"

"I sure can see, doll. But who are *they?* The hippies?"

"The hotel management. They say, eef I do not pay for all the damages, they weel make trouble for me."

"That sounds reasonable. Only what damages are we talking about?"

"The damages to thees hotel," the girl pouted. "And eet ees not *fair!* I am new een thees country. How was *I* supposed to know theese theengs? Een my country, during Mardi Gras, nobody *cares* about damages!"

"Hold it!" Randy frowned, starting to get the picture. "You're Brazilian?"

"Well, my family was originally from France, but si, I am a Carioca."

"And this hippie convention in the hall was *your* idea?"

"Eet started out to be a small get-together for a few friends. I deed not eenvite *all* of them to my leetle Mardi Gras."

"You may not have invited them, but they came!

Speaking of coming, why don't you come out of that corner and have a drink while I figure some smooth way to get us out of this absolutely ridiculous position?"

"Our poseetion does not look so reedeeculous to *me*, Senhor."

"It does to me. We're standing up."

"Oh, I see what you mean."

The girl crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed, still holding the sign more or less in place. Randy Kidd smiled to himself as he mixed a couple of highballs, making hers a double, and turned around. Then he stopped smiling.

"Had it fastened to the back of the sign, eh?" he muttered, taking a step toward her. The girl raised the muzzle of the little automatic until it was trained on a spot in the center of Randy's chest and nodded, "Weeth Scotch tape, Senhor. And now, I am goeeng to keel you."

"Any particular reason?" Randy asked, mildly. "Or are we just feeling beastly?"

"I am goeeng to keel you because eet was you who keeled my poor pappa! I have geeven firecrackers to the beatnecks out een the hall and, when they start shooteeng them off, I weel keel you. Then, I weel keel the Blue Queen!"

"I take it, then," smiled Randy, "your name is *not* Fifi Derrier?"

"I am Pauna DeSilva, daughter, and avenger, of Senhor Pappa DeSilva, rubber baron of Brazil and all-around good guy, who was keeled by double crossers!"

"True," Randy nodded, "but not by this particular double crosser. Have your drink, doll, while I clue you in on a cat named Medusa."

"I do not dreenk weeth people who murder my pappa," the girl sniffed.

"That's the general idea. Your father was killed by an international baddy known as Medusa. At least, that's what the fuzz in Rio think. *I'm* not so certain. There are some very screwball angles to this whole screwball mess."

"You do not fool me, Senhor," the girl sniffed. "Weeth thees gon pointed at you, you are makeeng op the lies to save your own meeserable life, no?"

"Yes. Only I don't *have* to lie, doll. Like, you couldn't shoot that gun if you tried."

So she tried.

The gun spat angrily and a vase of flowers across the room dissolved into a mess of spattered wet glass. Pauna DeSilva waited until the last gluggy flower dropped to the wet carpet before she blew the smoke out of the end of the barrel and said, "You were *say eeng?*"

"Funny . . ." Randy mused. "That gag worked pretty good the last time I pulled it. Oh well, we can't win 'em all. As I was saying, doll, you've got the wrong guy. *I* didn't scragg your old man. Neither did the Blue Queen. It was Medusa!"

"Bah hoomboog! I deed not come all thees way to hear a pack of lies!"

"Okay. Why not listen to the *truth?* Don't you *want* to get the dirty rat who killed your father?"

"Yes, dirty rat. That ees why I am goeeng to keel you, right now, weethout *waiteeng* for the fershloggen fire-crackers!"

It was a desperate chance, but, since his position was pretty desperate anyway, Randy took it. He placed the two drinks on the end table with studied nonchalance and, very casually, started to take off his pants.

"What . . . what are you *doeeng?*" the girl blinked.

"Zebras," Randy said, in a sober tone, "are not what they seem."

"Pardon?"

"Some people say they are white horses with black stripes, while others say they are black horses with white stripes. But if you read the last book, you know what a Zebra is. On the other hand, I'll bet you can't tell me what lies on its back in the grass and goes ding-dong."

"Please, Senhor? Thees eees so embarrasseeng!"

"Can't shoot a man with his pants down, eh?"

"Eet ees not *proper* for a man to take hees pants off een a nice gorl's room!"

"Yeah, but since when do nice girls pop out of closets as naked as a jaybird with a gun in their hand? Don't you want to know what lies flat on its back in the grass and goes ding-dong?"

"I want you to poot your pants back on!" Pauna DeSilva gleeped as Randy stepped out of his pants, peeled off his shirt and jacket in one motion, and started toward her in his jockey shorts. Then her eyes widened and she gasped, "You're putteeng me on!"

"What's the matter, babe? Never seen leopard jockey shorts before?"

"I have hord of padded shorts, Senhor," the girl sighed, a look of reluctant admiration creeping into her eyes even as her finger tightened on the trigger. "But thees ees ridiculous!"

"Padded?" frowned Randy. "We'll see about that!"

Suiting his actions to his words, Randy Kidd whipped off his shorts and joined the girl in her nudity. Pauna DeSilva stared in amazement.

"Ay, que muchacho, con *gleem!*" she sighed. "Eet seems soch a shame to have to keel soch a magneefeecent aneemal!"

"I'm with you, kitten," Randy smiled, taking another step. "Why don't you put that stupid gun away and take me home to raise?"

"Alas, I came to bury Caesar, not to praise heem. You have keeled my poor pappa and a gorl has to draw the line *somewhere!* Eef you take another step, I weel . . . Oooooops!"

And then she was too busy to say anything as Randy launched himself across the few feet between them like a guided missile.

Kidd's left hand gripped her gun hand and raised it toward Valhalla as his right arm wrapped itself around her slender waist, allowing its hand to slither down her spine and grip her most indelicately between her firm young

buttocks just as they crashed together across the bed. The gun in Pauna DeSilva's hand went off and fired a shot into the ceiling, showering them with falling plaster as they writhed, naked, on the satin bedspread.

"You beast!" the girl sobbed. "Forst you keel my poor pappa and now you are tryeeng to—to rape me!"

"I didn't kill your father," Randy corrected, getting his knee between her thighs and prying them apart as he pinned her fluttering breasts to the mattress with his heaving chest. The girl pulled the trigger again, sending a wild shot into the mirror atop his dresser as she gasped in surprise and sudden pleasure.

"Eet was *not* paddeeng!" she sighed, closing her eyes and biting his ear. As her long-stemmed legs locked around his waist, Randy murmured, "Drop the gun, baby. It cramps my style to do this with a pistol at my head."

"You mean, you can do eet *better?*"

"Get rid of that gun and you'll find out!"

"I came to keel you, darleeng."

"Let's just come and forget that jazz about killing anybody."

"I . . . I am, bot eet ees *wrong* to feel thees way about the man who keeled my pappa. We most *stop!*"

"In a minute, baby. In just a minute."

And then Pauna DeSilva released her grip on the pistol, allowing it to fall to the floor behind the bouncing bed as she whimpered in passion, pain, and pleasure and whispered, "Make eet an *hour*, darleeng?"

It didn't last *quite* an hour. But, when they finally did get around to relaxing a bit, Pauna DeSilva was snuggled against Randy's chest, the gun forgotten. (Randy hadn't forgotten. He'd managed, while they were getting to know each other better, to combine an unusual position from the Kama Sutra with kicking it out of reach beneath the bed.)

Randy reached for a couple of cigarettes and, as he was

lighting them for the two of them, the girl sighed, "Randy?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell me."

"About your father's murder? Well, according to the police in Rio, he was waylaid by some cat named Medusa as he went to pick up the Hu Ray from Murgatroid Schnook. Then somebody shot Schnook and . . ."

"I know about all that, Sweetheart," Pauna cut in, "my brother told me. Bot I would not leesten. I thought, seely gorl, that you and the Blue Queen deed eet. Bot now I know that nobody as nice as you could have keel my poor pappa."

"I'm a lover, not a killer," Randy agreed. "So what *did* you want to know, doll?"

"What lies flat on ects back een the grass and goes deeng-dong?"

"I'll have to tell you between chapters, doll. That cosmetics outfit would sue our publisher if we put it in print."

Chapter THIRTEEN

"I KNEW," Randy Kidd was saying smugly, as he finished filling Regina in on this latest development, "that no broad in the world could have pulled that trigger until she'd satisfied her curiosity. So, when I started taking off my pants, it took her mind off what she'd come to do in the first place and . . ."

"I get the picture," Regina grimaced. "So, now that you've added little Pauna's scalp to your collection, lover boy, what are we going to do with her?"

"She's in my pad right now," Randy shrugged. "Resting."

"Shouldn't *you* be? Resting, I mean. Like, between Una Hu, Passion Flowers, and now Pauna DeSilva, you must be spreading yourself pretty thin."

"Three women?" Randy shrugged. "No problem as long as I get plenty of steak and potatoes. Besides, I haven't seen Passion Flowers since we left Rio."

"Really?" Regina frowned. "Are you *sure*, Randy? Mamma won't spank, honey. She knows boy will be old goats."

"Honest, Regina, I haven't laid eyes, or anything else, on Passion Flowers since the other night in Rio. I don't even know where Passion Flowers is staying."

"I do," Regina smiled. "She's staying right here."

"Here? In this hotel?"

"On this floor. Didn't you say she was staying near the Passeio Publico in Rio?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, didn't little Pauna DeSilva vanish near the Passeio Publico?"

"Yeah . . ." Randy puzzled. "Only, she's not exactly vanished any more."

"But Una Hu is missing. And Una Hu was staying in the room next to Passion Flowers!"

"Gleep! You think there's a connection?"

"If not, it's a hellishly funny coincidence, no?"

"Yes. But . . . It doesn't make *sense*, Regina. Little Pauna and I got to talking after . . . after I told her what lies on its back in the grass and goes ding dong and she didn't *mention* Passion Flowers."

"Did she mention the Passeio Publico?"

"Sure I mean, she mentioned the waterfront, and the Passeio Publico is right near the waterfront. She said she followed me there. That would have been the night I, ah, visited Passion Flowers, I guess. Anyhow, she waited around in the park, looking to get a shot at me, and that must have been when her brother's informants lost track of her. The murderous little kook's been tracking us for days. Trying to get up the nerve to blow holes in us."

"I see she wasn't able to," Regina laughed.

"Naw, Pauna's a lover, not a killer," Randy grinned. "You want me to check on Passion Flowers?"

"Do you feel up to it?"

Randy nodded, then, remembering Passion Flowers' unusual views on love, wondered. But Randy Kidd had never refused a dangerous assignment for the Blue Queen before. Besides, he and Passion Flowers had some unfinished business.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, Passion Flowers was not in her room when Randy ankled down the hall to call on his red headed go-go girl. Never a man to pass up an opportunity, Randy whipped out his sliver of celluloid and opened the door. It only took him a few moments to case the joint and return, sputtering with indignation, to Regina's pad.

"She's got a *guy* in there with her!" he growled, indignation in his eyes. Regina shot him an amused glance and

asked, "You're sure, Randy? I haven't seen any men with her, and that room's a single."

"The hell it is! Some guy's got his stuff in there besides hers. Couple of suits, shaving kit, man's cologne. That sort of jazz. The bitch is shacked up with another guy!"

"Oh?" Regina answered coolly, with an amused shake of her blond head. "And what about *you*, Randy-wandy? I seem to remember you breaking in here a few moments ago, bursting to brag of your latest conquest."

"That's different. I'm a man!"

"And on a man it looks good? Remind me to tell you about a man I knew, a long time ago, who had your views on the double standard. It's an amusing story, if you can call a love story that turned into a dirty joke amusing. It might help you understand a few things. But, to get back to our present troubles, what are your plans for this evening?"

"I don't plan that far ahead, if I can help it. What's up?"

"We've been invited to entertain at a private party. Place out in the desert. This Hollywood producer's rebuilt an old ranchhouse out past Victorville and he's giving an intimate little housewarming. Probably not more than three or four hundred people."

"And we're to furnish the entertainment? What's that got to do with finding Una Hu and the Hu Ray?"

"Nothing, as far as I know. But we need the money. You ever hear of G I Gottrocks?"

"The guy who produced *Frankenstein Meets God on Mount Sinai?*"

"That's the man."

"Gee," Randy breathed, "I've always wanted to meet a guy with real class."

The ride out to Casa Caramba was uneventful. The desert's a pretty uneventful place, unless you have a flat, run out of gas, or get lost. They stopped in Riverside for

gas, had the tires checked in Victorville, and didn't get lost until they left the main road.

"We weel die!" Pauna DeSilva wailed. "We weel die of the thorst on thees terreeble deserta and nobody weel ever know what *became* of os!"

"Oh, I don't know," Regina observed. "At the rate Los Angeles is subdividing, they'll be opening a supermarket along in here any day now."

"Eet ees not fonny!" Pauna sniffed. "You make the joke, bot, when the son comes op an' we all start to die of thorst, eet weel not be so fonny!"

Randy said nothing as he drove through the hubcap-deep dust. Pauna was right about it being no joke to be lost on the desert. But he thought she *was* padding her part a bit. It had been the Blue Queen's idea to rent the car, and his to bring Pauna DeSilva along. As he peered out at the greasewood and joshua trees in the headlight beams, he was starting to wish he'd given both ideas a miss.

"I see a light!" Pauna exclaimed.

"Where?" asked Randy, looking all around. Either she had keener eyes than he had, or she was imagining things. The Carioca girl pointed to the right and said, "Over there! On the right! Eet looks like a house!"

"You see anything, Regina?" Randy asked the Blue Queen.

"Nothing but a lot of dry scrub, lover. Are you sure you didn't see a low-hanging star, Pauna?"

"No, eet was yellow, like a weendow. There! I joost saw eet one more time! Toorn right at the next fork een the road!"

"What fork?" Randy muttered. "And what *road*, for Pete's sake? This track we're on is barely wide enough for a bicycle!"

And then, as if to make a liar of him, the dirt track winding between the joshua trees suddenly forked in two directions.

"Leny meeny," Randy muttered. "Did you say right?"

"Si, that ees the way! I joost saw the light again."

"Damned if I did!" Randy grumbled in a puzzled tone.

"May as well do as she says, Randy," Regina sighed. "At least, that way, one of us will know where we're going."

"Right it is, then," Randy shrugged, turning the rented car onto the least promising of the two choices. He drove slowly along the narrow twisting road, peering cautiously ahead as far as the headlight beams probed the silver gray branches of desert scrub as he muttered, "I just hope we're not driving into a canyon!"

They didn't drive into a canyon. They topped a rise and there, spread out below them, they saw the well-lighted grounds of an imposing desert ranchhouse. Randy stopped the car to admire the view as he muttered, "I'll be damned. I think this must be the place!"

It was. A spanking new sign, burned into white pine with a hot branding iron, proclaimed at the gate that they were entering the grounds of Casa Caramba. Japanese paper lanterns hung from the branches of pepper and mimosa trees scattered about the garden and Randy saw, by the other cars in the drive, that they were not the first to arrive. He pulled up in front of the California-Spanish ranchhouse and helped the girls out as what looked like a vaquero came to park the car for them. The man *looked* like a vaquero, in a black charro costume complete with silver brocade and wide-brimmed Mexican sombrero, but the Spanish-American effect was somewhat marred by the swinging London accent as he said, "The gov'ner's expectin' yer, mate. Take the birds inside whilst I parks the bloody bus!"

Another vaquero met them at the door. This one looked more like the real thing, until he opened his mouth to reveal stainless steel teeth and a decidedly Russian accent. He told them they were expected and escorted them inside, where a worried-looking little man with a bald head and gladstone bags under his watery

gray eyes said he was glad they could make it. He *said* he was glad, but, from the woebegone look in his eyes, he seemed as anxious to see them, or anyone else, as the Black Death.

"Randy," Regina whispered as the Russian-accented vaquero led them into the large timber-ceilinged bar. "Do you know who that was?"

"G.I. Gottrocks? The guy who's giving this wingding?"

"Almost, but not quite. I've seen pictures of G.I."

"And?"

"And that little man looks something like him. But it's not the real thing!"

"Brother in law or something?" Randy shrugged, turning to the vaquero and asking in a louder tone, "When are we going to meet Mr. Gottrocks, comrade?"

"You jast met him, sport," the Vaquero answered. "And please to not make fonnies, eh? Igor does not *like* fonnies!"

"I'll say no more, Igor," Randy shrugged, with a puzzled frown in Regina's direction. The Blue Queen wasn't looking at him. Her attention was riveted on someone at the bar. Randy turned the way she was gazing and muttered, "Well, well, well, small desert, isn't it?"

Una Hu was at the bar, talking to I.C. Hands.

"We thought we'd lost you, Wiggles," Regina purred, slipping onto a bar stool near the suddenly red-faced Eurasion girl. The British agent shot her a frosty smile and said, "You may as well use Miss Hu's real name, Miss Regina. You see, I know who she is. We were just talking about it."

"Una, baby," Randy frowned. "Where in the blue blazes did you disappear to? We've been looking all over for you and your . . . you know what!"

"That phony-balony Hu Ray?" Una shrugged, with a guilty little smile.

"Phony-balony?" Randy blinked. "You mean, you don't *have* the Hu Ray on you?"

"Of course not," she yawned. "You didn't really think there *was* such a dopy thing, did you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did," Randy frowned. He blinked in sudden thought as he added, "As a matter of fact you told me you'd witnessed a demonstration of it, Una! Remember the bit about it making all your clothes dissolve and . . . You mean, your clothes *didn't* dissolve the night you became Murgatroid Schnnok's . . . ah, friend?"

"Of course not. If anyone *thought* about the nutty Hu Ray for a minute, they'd realize it was impossible! At least, impossible to disintegrate the bonds holding molecules of rubber and plastic together without killing the people wearing the stuff."

"I don't see why," Randy frowned. "People aren't made of rubber and plastic, are they?"

"No," Regina cut in, "but they're made of protein molecules."

"So, what does that mean?"

"That means, since protein molecules are even longer and more complicated than rubber or plastic molecules, Randy, that a ray that dissolved rubber would dissolve *people!*"

"Glug!" Randy gagged. "How come you didn't think of this before?"

"I did," Regina laughed.

Randy blinked in confusion at Regina, then turned to blink in some more confusion at Una Hu as he muttered, "Then, why in the dickens did we bring this kooky little broad all the way to Holywood?"

"Simply," Regina yawned, "to find out what her game *really* was."

"And to find out what Medusa's game was," I.C. Hands added. "You might as well know, Mister Kidd, since everyone else does, that you and the Blue Queen have been working for British Intelligence!"

"We have? Since when?"

"Since Medusa shot me with that poison dart, sweet-

uns," Regina explained. "It was this sweet little old I.C. Hands, here, who pointed out that Medusa, an expert murderer, would have *known* there wasn't a chance in the world of really killing me with that little old dart dipped in curare."

"Okay. If Medusa knew it wouldn't hurt you, why did he shoot you with it?"

"To scare me. It's I.C.'s theory that Medusa, whoever he, she, or it is, *wanted* us to deliver little old Una, here, to Hollywood. Or maybe I should just say to the West Coast. Murgatroid Schnook was supposed to bring her, but old Murgie got too hot for the job, once he'd been spotted by Interpol, the CIA, British intelligence and you-name-it in Rio."

"So they scragged Murgatroid and turned her over to us?"

"Something like that."

"But . . . but *why*, for crying out tears!"

"Yes, why?" added Una Hu. "I just went along with the gag when that weirdo Murgatroid, decided I was the missing daughter of some nut named Hu. I mean, it was a chance to get out of that awful dump in Hong Kong and . . ."

"You . . . you're *not* Una Hu?" Randy gasped. He looked blankly at Pauna DeSilva and added, "Okay, I'll bite. Who are *you*, doll?"

"I am Pauna DeSilva, avenger of her father's death. Eef I can find out who *keeled* heem!" swore Pauna. Randy sighed in relief and, looking at Regina, asked "You think *she's* telling the truth?"

"About who she is? Certainly. Of course, there's that bit about her knowing the way here tonight . . . but we'll let that go for now."

"I saw the light!" Pauna began. But Randy cut her off with, "Yeah, down here in this valley. And you just happened to *guess* we were coming to a fork in the road. Never mind about you, doll. What I want to know now, is, if this isn't Una Hu, who is it?"

"I'm Hazel Ku," the girl they'd thought was Una Hu hollered. "I was a stripper at the Fuji Maru, a Jap joint in Hong Kong, and . . ."

"Hazel Ku, from the Fuji Maru," Randy muttered, with a dazed expression. He repeated, "Hazel Ku, from the Fuji Maru . . ."

"Vodeo-vo and poop-poop-ee-do!" added Regina. "Put eight bars to it and it swings!"

"But, tell me, Hazel Ku from the Fuji Maru," Randy frowned. "What have you to do with the ray invented by Hu?"

"Nothing," Hazel Ku shrugged. "Like I said, this nut of the world, Murgatroid Schnook, decided I was Hu's daughter, or that I looked enough like Hu's daughter to pass for her, and, together, we conned a few people into thinking I was she."

"You mean, it was all a con job? You were just pretending to be Una Hu in order to sell the non-existent ray of a crackpot scientist to unsuspecting Communists?"

"And to my poor pappa?" sobbed Pauna DeSilva. "How could you?"

"It was easy for Murgatroid," Hazel Ku shrugged. "He was a real rat fink."

"Si," Pauna said. "And what about *you?*"

"*I* didn't con anybody. I just went along with the gag on account I wanted to get to Hollywood. Murgatroid said, if I strung along with him until we sold this creepy lens and stuff to RAPE, he'd split with me and I could buy a wardrobe and go into show biz!"

"But . . ." Randy objected, "there is no RAPE in Hollywood."

"Well, gee whiz," Hazel Ku replied, "how was I to know that?"

Before they could argue further, Regina turned to glance at someone who'd just entered the lounge. "It seems," she smiled, "like old home week, Randy-wandy."

Randy looked in the direction of the door and smiled sheepishly.

It was Passion Flowers. The red-headed go-go dancer was with a small dapper man in a pinstriped suit and penciled-looking mustache. His hair was so greasy and slicked down it was hard to tell if it was real hair or black enamel on a bald head. The redhead caught sight of the group at the bar and trilled, "Yoo-hoo, Randy, darling! What are *you* doing here?"

"I was just going to ask you the same thing," Randy smiled.

"Regina and I are entertaining tonight. If the party ever gets under way."

"Me too," Passion Flowers laughed. "This is Mortimer Styff, my agent. According to him, I'm supposed to be the star attraction at this house warming!"

"*Really?*" Regina trilled, just as sweetly, as she digested the latest news from the fighting front. Before Passion Flowers could cross swords with her, however, Hazel Ku cut in to say, "What are you broads talking about? *I'm* supposed to be the headliner tonight. Mister Gottrocks cast me for the part himself!"

"On a couch?" Passion Flowers smiled, oh so sweetly.

"How," purred Hazel Ku, "would you like me to pull your red hair out by its black roots?"

"Now sweeties," Regina soothed, grabbing the Eurasian girl's handbag just as she was winding up for a backhanded swipe at Passion Flowers with it. "There's no sense in us fighting among ourselves. It's obvious that someone's been playing a funny."

"I was told *I* was to be the headline attraction," Hazel Ku sniffed, "Gimme back my purse."

"I was told that *I* was the headliner," Passion Flowers insisted. "And don't you give it back to her until you check it for guns, knives, brass knuckles and big black whips!"

"Why," asked Regina, handing the Ku kook her purse, "don't the three of us check with G.I. Gottrocks? It was *his* idea to tell all three of us we were to star tonight. Let's see what he has to say for his miserable self."

"It had better be good," Passion Flowers muttered.

"Mort, sweetums, why don't *you* talk to the louse? You know a girl's agent's supposed to handle sordid details with the peasantry."

Mortimer Styff shrugged, adjusted the lapels of his pinstripe suit, and said, "Sure, Doll. Just as soon as he comes in."

"Whaddaya mean as soon as he comes in?" Randy frowned. "We just met the creep at the door. Little baldheaded guy with bags under his eyes."

"I know who you mean," Styff nodded. "But that's not G.I. Gottrocks. I *know* G.I. Gottrocks." He yawned, exposing a diamond-studded gold tooth as he added, "Far as that goes, I know the joker at the door, too. He's not G.I."

"Who is he, then?" asked Randy.

"A bit player from Central Casting named Dodsworth Doppelganger. Used to handle him a few years back. Couldn't get him any feature rolls. He looked so much like G.I. Gottrocks that the directors were afraid to cast him. Thought G.I. might think they were getting cute."

"Then you mean," Randy frowned, "we were invited here tonight by a *fake* film producer?"

"Fake party, too," Regina mused. "You notice something funny about the guest list, Randy and all?"

"What's that?" Passion Flowers asked nervously.

"Well, except for Pauna DeSilva and I.C. Hands here, everyone in this place seems to be entertainers or connected with entertaining. I mean, there don't seem to be any *guests!*"

Chapter FOURTEEN

"THAT'S CRAZY!" Hazel Ku from the Fuji Maru muttered. "Who are all these other people?"

"Servants of G.I. Gottrocks, or, I should say, servants of whoever owns this place. We are *not* at Casa Caramba, you know."

"We aren't?" Randy blinked. "Where in the hell *are* we, then?"

"That's a good question, lover. Why don't we ask little Pauna DeSilva, if we ever see her again?"

"Pauna?" Randy asked, turning around to look for the Brazilian girl and noticing, for the first time, that she was gone.

"She told *you* how to get here too, didn't she, Passion honey?" Regina smiled. Passion Flowers blinked in surprise and then she looked at Mortimer Styff, shrugged, and said, "As a matter of fact, she *did* tell us about the short cut past Victorville. Said it would save us ten miles of travel on the highway."

"And it did," Mortimer Styff cut in. "I was surprised, when I checked my odometer, to find we'd driven ten miles less than we were supposed to to reach G.I. Gottrock's place."

"That is simply because," Regina smiled, "you never did. The real Casa Caramba is ten miles farther. *This* place, thanks to a spanking new sign, is *another* ranch entirely!"

"I say!" gasped I.C. Hands. "I didn't know Miss DeSilva and Passion Flowers knew one another! Did you?"

"Of course," Regina nodded. "It was Passion Flowers who took Pauna in off the street when she decided to van-

ish near the Passeio Publico. Pauna wanted to leave Brazil, but she didn't want her brother or the rest or the family to know she was on the trail of her father's murderer. *Or* the three million dollars the murderer, Medusa, hijacked when he murdered Senhor DeSilva!"

"Gold is thicker than blood, eh what?" I.C. Hands mused, glancing thoughtfully at Passion Flowers to add, "I take it, then, that Miss DeSilva bribed Passion Flowers, here, to sneak her out of Brazil, in the same way Una Hu, or I should say Hazel Ku, inveigled you two to sneak *her* out? Namely, by promising to cut her in on the pie, once it was divided up, here in the States?"

"I didn't know anything about any three million dollars!" Passion Flowers began to blurt. Then she suddenly reddened and bit her lip. Randy Kidd, his mind in a whirl but starting to function again, asked, "Why *did* you agree to go along with the gag, Passion?"

"I . . . I felt *sorry* for her," Passion Flowers tried. "I wanted to help her uncover the identity of her father's murderer!"

"You don't like murderers?" Regina asked innocently.

"I . . . I don't know what you're talking about!" cried Passion Flowers. But her eyes didn't agree with her mouth as they shot daggers at the Blue Queen. The latter smiled back at her and replied, "I think you *do*, sweetums. Little Pauna blackmailed you into helping her. If you hadn't, she threatened you with the one thing you fear most. *Exposure!*"

"Exposure?" said I.C. Hands. "What is there to expose?"

"About Passion Flowers or about *you*, I.C. baby?"

"*Me?* Why, dash it all, I'll have you know I'm a member in good standing of British Intelligence!"

"And on the take," Regina nodded. "Just like your friend and co-conspirator, Murgatroid Schnook was on the take before they caught him and kicked him out on his ear. Tell me, I.C., was it *your* idea to double cross Murgatroid after he conned Senhor DeSilva out of the

three million dollars, or did your friend, Medusa, beat you to it?"

"My *friend* Medusa?" I.C. Hands blinked. "Medusa is an international killer, and a terrible person!"

"And he, she, or it, wanted us to deliver little Miss Hu, or Ku, along with the three million clams he took from DeSilva's body, to a non-existent address in Hollywood. Just as *you* did, I.C. darling!"

"This is preposterous!" I.C. Hands blurted. "I *told* you I was trying to catch up with Medusa! You . . . you must be mad!"

"And crazy, too," snapped Hazel Ku from the Fuji Maru. " 'Cause I got news for you, all *I* got is a Hu—ray, that is. I've never *seen* three million dollars. I didn't even think there was that much money in the world. Not for real!"

"It would be quite a bundle," Randy nodded. "I mean, if the chick was packing three million clams around, in reasonably small bills, it would be enough to fill a steamer trunk!"

"True," Regina nodded. "And that was why they gave her the phony-balony story about a secret-formula lens for the Hu Ray. You see, three million dollars *is* an awful lot of gelt, if you carry it around in the form of paper. But, if you'll remember, Randy, Brazil is famous for something besides rubber!"

"Coffee?" Randy blinked. "Good grief, Senhor DeSilva showed up to buy the Hu Ray with three million dollars worth of *coffee?*"

"No, but you're getting warm!"

"*Diamonds!*" Passion Flowers suddenly exclaimed. "I should have known, as soon as you mentioned something about a lens. Pauna's father was killed for a king-sized *diamond!*"

"Murgatroid *did* give it to me and tell me to hang onto it," Hazel Ku muttered, fumbling in her pocketbook. "But he gave me the lens in Rio, *before* he went to meet DeSilva and . . ."

"The one he gave you at first was paste," Regina explained. "Not hard to prepare ahead of time, since the famous DeSilva's diamond pendant, the Carioca Teardrop, was, according to Lieutenant DePussa, the most famous diamond ever found in Brazil. Not knowing its true value, you, of course, would be expected to guard it well enough to carry it to Hollywood, but not too well to avoid anyone switching the paste diamond for the real thing."

"Then," Randy exclaimed, "*that* was why we were conned into bringing her to Hollywood, to the non-existent address of RAPE! Murgatroid, and Medusa, and this creep, I.C. Hands, here, figured to recover it tonight, at this party!"

"Well!" Hazel Ku frowned. "If anybody expects to recover an old diamond from *me*, they're just going to have to whistle Dixie!"

"You . . . you don't have it?" gleeped I.C. Hands.

"I thought I did," Hazel Ku frowned. "Right here in my purse. But it's not there now!"

"Oh, sticky wickets and all that!" I.C. Hands sighed, turning to a beaded curtain covering a nearby archway. "Did you hear what this terrible child just said, my dear?"

"I heard," Pauna DeSilva answered sullenly, stepping out from behind the beaded curtains. There was a very wicked-looking German Luger in her hand and she was not alone. Two vaqueros, with Uzzi sub-machine guns, were flanking her on either side as the Carioca asked Regina, very soberly, "Ees thees *true*, Senhorita Regina, about thees . . . thees Senhor Hands being een, how you say, cahoots weeth Medusa, the porson who keel my poor pappa an' steal my family jewels?"

"Really, Pauna, let's not be hasty!" began I.C. Hands. But the Carioca hissed, "Silencio, peeg! I am speakeeng weeth the Blue Queen!"

"He was the silent partner of Murgatroid Schnook," Regina shrugged. "And the two of them planned to take your father for three million dollars worth of diamond.

I'm not sure which one of them *killed* him. But, we could always ask."

"It was Murgatroid! Oh, definitely!" I.C. Hands whimpered.

"Thees ees very easy to say," the Brazilian girl frowned. "Bot, eef thees Murgatroid ees dead, you weel have the hard time *proveeng* heem, eh?" She nodded to one of the vaqueros, who raised the muzzle of his Uzzi and said, "Shalom."

"You don't understand!" I.C. Hands wailed. And then he sort of lost the thread of the conversation as the Uzzi chattered like an insane woodpecker and cartwheeled him across the bar and into a table and chair. He was probably dead before he hit the floor but, just for luck, the Uzzi gunner sent another long burst his way that sent splinters of wood and splashes of I.C. Hands in every direction. The Brazilian beauty stood impassively as the gun spit lead at her side and then, with a curt nod, signaled her gunner to knock it off. The sudden silence was deafening.

"Now," Pauna DeSilva said, without giving the others a chance to get over the ringing in their ears. "I weel take back what ees rightfully mine. I weel take back the Carioca Teardrop!"

"Don't look at me!" sighed Hazel Ku. "Like I said, I just ain't got the darned thing!"

"Streep," snapped Pauna DeSilva.

"You mean *strip?*"

"Si, streep. We weel see eef you are telleeng the truth!"

Hazel Ku shrugged and, saying, "I usually do this to music," started peeling off her clothes.

As each garment fell to the floor, a third armed vaquero moved in and searched it carefully, running his fingers along the seams and, each time he finished, looking at Pauna DeSilva and shaking his head negatively. Once his back was to Randy and the tall spy tensed to spring, but Regina, standing next to him, put a hand on his wrist and said, "Ixnay."

"They're going to ixnay ooyay, in an inutemay!" Randy hissed. "Like, how long do you think it's going to take that murderous little bitch to figure it was *you* who slipped it out of Una's, I mean Hazel's, purse when you were separating her and Passion?"

"Relax," Regina soothed. "I haven't got it."

"Scout's honor?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"You just may do that," Randy muttered, "if she doesn't get her daddy's diamond back!"

"Are you satisfied?" Hazel Ku was saying as, stark naked and hands on hips, she faced the DeSilva heiress defiantly.

"I will be in a moment," Pauna DeSilva purred dangerously. She nodded to the vaquero, who picked up what looked like a transistor radio attached to a small hand mike from the bar. He switched it on and, as it clicked like a stock market ticker-tape machine, ran the wand of the Geiger counter over Hazel Ku's lush tawny cruves.

"Tee-hee," giggled Hazel. "That *tickles!* What are you trying to prove and . . . gleep! Does he have to put it *there?*"

"The Carioca Teardrop, like many Brazilian diamonds found in the Matto Grosso, is slightly radioactive," Pauna DeSilva explained in a bored voice. "If the Geiger counter ees near eet, we weel hear eet calleeng for eets momma!"

"Well, tell him to be a little gentle, for crying out tears!" Hazel Ku sniffed, "I mean, fun is fun, but unless he's going to *finish* the job, I'd just as soon not get all hot and bothered!"

The vaquero looked at his mistress and shrugged. The Carioca girl frowned and said, "Fortunately for you, you seem to have told the truth, for once. There remains the detail of you being meexed up een the death of my father, however."

"She was only a dupe," Randy cut in. "If she'd known what was going on, she'd never have been dumb enough to wander around all this time with three million clams in her purse and . . ."

"Silence, handsome spy!" Pauna DeSilva snapped. "Joost because we have been . . . good *frans*, does not mean I weel not keel you eef I find you een my way." She looked thoughtfully at Randy and added, "I may, anyway. A goil has to theenk of her reputation."

"Randy never kisses and tells," Regina lied. "Besides, you've got enough killing on your conscience, haven't you?"

"You can only hang once," Pauna shrugged. "Take off your clothes."

"I . . . *beg* your pardon?"

"Do not stall, Senhorita Regina. You know I eentend to sorch every one of you. And *you* more than anyone else, except posseebly Randy Keed, have had the most oportuneety to sweetch the poseetion of the diamond een Senhorita Ku's porse!"

"Well, if you boys would look the other way," Regina sighed, unzipping her blue brocaded evening gown.

The Blue Queen wore nothing under her gown. And so it was a matter of seconds before she stood in ivory nakedness before the enraptured gaze of all and sundry. The man with the Geiger counter, his hands trembling slightly, finished examining Regina's purse, gown, and Regina, before turning to Pauna DeSilva with a red-faced little shake of his head.

"Passion Flowers ees next!" Pauna DeSilva said, in the sober tone of a judge pronouncing sentence.

"Can't the *boys* go first?" Passion Flowers whimpered, her face scarlet. "*Please*, Pauna, you *know* how embarrassing it will be for me. I swear I don't know anything about your old diamond! Stealing diamonds just isn't my bag!"

"But morder ees," Pauna DeSilva observed. "You mor-

dered Voddie Ville and you mordered Dirty Deck by setting fire to hees clob!"

"You forget Pop Weezle," Regina added. "I just got a wire from that nice Lieutenant DePuss this afternoon. They found Pop's body in the ruins. So that makes *three* murders we know of. I imagine it only took the threat of exposure as Voddie Ville's murderer to get Passion to help you slip out of Brazil unobserved."

"I theenk Passion may have keeled wan more porson," Pauna DeSilva added grimly. "I theenk, now, she may have had sometheeng to do weeth my poor pappa's death, after all! Eef she has the diamond, I weel know eet!"

"I haven't!" wailed Passion Flowers. "Make the boys strip first and you'll see! One of them *has* to have it!"

"How about our friend, I.C. Hands?" asked Regina. "You didn't search *him*, you know."

"Eef he had the diamond, he would have left," Pauna DeSilva shrugged. Then she frowned and added, "Ramon, ron the Geiger over heem!"

While Ramon was gingerly searching the corpse, Pauna DeSilva looked at Randy and said, "Streep."

"Aw, come on, baby! You *know* what *I* look like with my clothes off."

"I weel know what you look like *dead*, eef you make any more cracks like that!" Pauna snapped. She nodded to her aide and, as the muzzle of the latter's Uzzi rose, Randy Kidd sang, "A pretty Mel is like a girlody," and started shucking out of his clothes.

Needless to say, they did not find the diamond on Randy. The corpse of I.C. Hands was just as innocent of diamond smuggling and, while Mortimer Styff made an amusing picture in the altogether, he didn't have the Carioca Teardrop, either.

Pauna DeSilva looked thoughtfully at Passion Flowers as the redhead rolled her eyes around like a horse down in the shafts. A malicious little smile crossed the Carioca girl's rather cruel lips as she said, "Eet ees *your* torn, Passion!"

"How can you be so *cruel!*" Passion Flowers whimpered. "After all I've done for you, Pauna. After all, after all we've *meant* to one another!"

"For crying out tears?" Randy whispered to Regina. "She sounds like . . . like a *dyke!* But she and I . . . I mean, there was some man's clothes in her room, and . . ."

"Clothes *she* wore, on the plane," Regina explained.

"Passion Flowers wore a man's suit?" Randy blinked. "You're crazy! I saw her on the plane. Red hair and all!"

"You saw Pauna DeSilva, wearing Passion Flowers's *red wig. That* was how she got out of the country and through Brazilian and U.S. Customs! Pauna, wearing the red wig, and carrying the passport of Passion Flowers, was able to pass as the go-go girl. While *Passion* got through by disguising herself as her *usual* alter-ego, Dorian Studd."

"Dorian Studd?" blinked Randy. "You mean, Passion Flowers is also the infamous international jewel thief, Dorian Studd? But Studd . . . Studd's supposed to be a *guy!*"

"It's a good disguise, don't you think?" Regina agreed.

"Enough of thees idle cheet-chat." Pauna DeSilva snapped.

"Passion, my pet, take off your clothes!"

"You . . . you little bitch!" Passion Flowers sobbed, starting to undress. Then, as her eyes caught Randy's amused and curious stare, she whirled and, in a desperate attempt for the nearby window, started running.

She didn't get very far. Two Uzzis and the Luger in Pauna DeSilva's manicured hand told her to slow down. And she did. In a puddle of blood, brains, and shredded rubber padding.

"Poor little man," Regina sighed. "He always *did* lose his head when he was about to be exposed. That was why he killed poor Voddie Ville, you know. She walked in on him with his clothes off when he, thinking the star on that room meant him, was dressing for the show and . . ."

"Hold it!" Randy gasped. "You mean that . . . that Passion Flowers is, I mean was, a . . . a *man?*"

"Of course. Lieutenant DePussa *told* us that the person who strangled Voddie Ville was too strong to be a woman, remember? And who else, besides Passion Flowers, was backstage at the time? Everyone else had an alibi!"

"Yeah, but I thought . . . I mean, you said . . . That she, I mean he, was in drag when she, I mean, oh hell, I thought Passion Flowers was a *dame* who dressed up, part of the time, as a guy."

"No, Randy dear. *He* was a man who dressed up, part of the time, as a *girl*. It made a perfect disguise between jobs for Dorian Studd, international jewel thief, gigolo, an all-around bad guy!"

"*Gigolo?*" Randy gasped, looking at Pauna DeSilva as the cold-eyed Brazilian girl supervised the search of her helper and erstwhile lover's body. Then, thinking back to a certain incident near the Passeio Publico, Randy gagged and muttered, "I think I'm going to be sick!"

"According to his police dossier," Regina explained, "Dorian Studd was known to be A.C.-D.C. In other words, he plugged in either way."

"Please," Randy grimaced. "I know what is A.C.-D.C. Why can't we just forget it, huh?"

"He deed not have the diamond stolen from my poor pappa," Pauna DeSilva frowned, swinging the muzzle of her Luger around to cover the party of naked hostages. She looked thoughtfully at her prisoners and added, "I warn you, I am groweeng most weary of thees farce!"

"You're growing weary?" sighed Randy. "How do you think we feel, doll? We've pages and pages to go and it's *cold* here in the desert at night. How about giving us back our clothes?"

"Not unteel I gat my fameely jewels!" Pauna pouted.

"At least let *me* go," said Mortimer Styff.

"Why?" asked Pauna DeSilva. "Don't you know where

ees my poor pappacito's famous radioacteeve diamond?"

"No, I never heard of it. What's more, now that you've shot my client, I don't have another thing to do with this plot."

"That sounds reasonable," Pauna smiled. It was not a nice smile as the murderously inclined Carioca raised the muzzle of her pistol.

"What . . . what are you going to do?" gasped Mortimer Styff.

"I am goeeng to seemplify the next few chapters, Senhor."

"I wish you wouldn't," Styff sniffed. "I'm too young to die."

"Really?" she asked, with scarcely concealed boredom. "How old are you, Senhor?"

"I'll be forty-seven next Tuesday. If I live that long."

"Don' worry," Pauna DeSilva yawned. "You won't."

The gun spat three times and Mortimer Styff, after a certain amount of twitching, fell nuddy and somewhat lewdly across the body of his erstwhile client, Passion Flowers. Pauna DeSilva gazed at the pile of bullet-mangled flesh and shrugged. "Haveeng eleeminated a few extras," she said. "We can get back to the main action. Are you three weeleeng to cooperate?"

"Any time, any place, and any position, Pauna Baby," Randy brightened.

"Please, Randy my sweet," the kill-crazy Carioca cracked. "We have already *tried* every poseetion. Eet ees now time for me to betray you, see?"

"Tell me, Pauna Juana," put in Regina in sudden interest as a thought crossed her desperately racing mind. "Was it you who shot Murgatroid Schnook full of dum-dum bullets and then stole his body?"

"What would *I* weesh weeth the body of Murgatroid Schnook?" Pauna pouted. "All I weesh ees the Carioca Teardrop and a good head start on the Los Angeles police force!"

She paused thoughtfully, shot the Blue Queen a look, and added, "For why you ask such a fooleesh question?"

"It just occurred to me," Regina answered, "that at the rate we're running out of suspects, we're going to have a heck of a time figuring this mess out."

"Don't look at *me*," put in Hazel Ku from the Fuji Maru. "I had nothing to do with spilling his grew, or swiping him, too."

"Eef you do not stop talkeeng like that," Pauna DeSilva muttered ominously, "I weel keel you *before* I torture the secret out of you."

"Gee, thanks a lot," Hazel Ku muttered. Then she looked worried and continued, "Did you say torture?"

"Si. I intend to torture you unteel you talk."

"But . . . Suppose I *can't* tell you where your damned old daddy's diamond is?"

"You weel weesh you *deed!*" shrugged Pauna. She nodded to her henchmen and the three of them, still naked as jaybirds, were led out into the desert night. Randy had been right about one thing. It was *cold* on the desert at that hour!

"This hardly seems fair, Pauna-juana," the Blue Queen observed. "After all, only *one* of us could possibly know where your darned old diamond has been stashed. *N'est-ce pas?*"

"So?"

"So, any way you slice it, you're going to wind up torturing two innocent people at the very least. I mean, doesn't this strike you as just a teeny-weeny bit fiendish?"

"So what? I *am* a fiend," Pauna laughed. "You know what I am goeeng to do to the three of you? I am goeeng to tie you down, naked, on top of ant heels. Ant heels fool of red ants."

"I'll settle for black," Randy muttered. "I've got nothing against an ant just because of her color."

"Silencio! I say red ants and I say red ants because red

ants bite Like the *fire!* You weel scream for mercy when the ants deeg eento your flesh weeth red-hot jaws!"

"Mandibles, honey," Regina corrected. "Ants don't have jaws. They bite with their mandibles."

"Mandibles-shmandibles, they weel bite like cannibals," Pauna DeSilva cackled witchily.

"You know what?" Randy whispered. "This kook is *crazy!*"

"What else is new?" shrugged the Blue Queen.

Chapter FIFTEEN

Of course, ants sleep at night. So there wasn't much action at first. Randy, Regina, and Hazel Ku from the Fuji Maru were spreadeagled, flat on their naked backs, across three adjoining hills in a subdivision of Los Angeles occupied, for the moment, by retired ants. The ant hills were cold, and rather lumpy, but, as of the moment, not as uncomfortable as they would be when the sun came up.

That should have been in a few hours, at the rate things were going. But, to Randy's displeasure, there was a distinctly ruddy glow in the western sky. Pauna DeSilva saw it, too, and grinned wickedly as she pointed, a little overdramatically, and chortled, "Behold, the son ees riseeng!"

"In the *West*, sweetums?" Regina answered in a slightly amused tone.

Pauna frowned and looked again. "Holy holocaust!" she hollered. "Someone set the rancho on fire!"

"It was that nogoodnick bit player you hired!" her Russian-accented henchman grumbled, galumphing off across the cacti toward the burning ranchhouse. Pauna DeSilva screamed, "Come back here! We are not through torturing the locale of the Carioca Teardrop out of these three steenkers!"

"In a moment," Regina observed, "you won't have to worry about where the fabulous diamond is, sweetnik."

"What . . . what do you mean?"

"Well, it's not *here*, as any fool can plainly see. So, ipso facto, it has to be . . . are you ready sweetie? *In the house!*"

"Ay caramba and oy gewalt!" Pauna DeSilva screamed, following her henchmen in a headlong dash for the

ranchhouse that, at the moment, seemed bent on going up in smoke.

Regina waited until they were out of earshot before asking, "Do you think you can get loose, Randy lover?"

"I'm trying," Randy replied.

"Well, try harder, before they come back. It's almost sunrise and you *know* I *freckle!*"

"Freckles-schmeckles. It's those ants I'm worried about," Randy grunted, straining at his bonds as he continued, "Were you going to wait until they started biting before you told them where you stashed the damned dismond?"

"Of course not. I knew they'd lose interest as soon as the house caught on fire."

"The *fire* was your idea, too?"

"Certainly. It's not *my* house, you know! Besides, I thought it might shed some light on the subject. I imagine the place will be crawling with fuzz pretty soon. They'll see the glow in the sky for miles across this dead-flat desert."

"Hey, that's right! So why don't we just relax and enjoy it? Like, the cops ought to get her long before those ants wake up!"

"But we won't be alive," Regina explained. "I imagine little Pauna will figure that out for herself, you know. They'll come back to bury us before the law arrives."

"Glug," Randy grunted, straining harder.

"What's to prevent them from cutting out?" asked Hazel Ku from the other ant hill. "I mean, now that the ranchhouse is burning down, and the diamond is burning up, what's to keep them hanging around the old homestead?"

"Shall you tell her, Randy, or shall I?" Regina asked dryly.

"You tell her," Randy groaned through gritted teeth. "I'm busy!"

"Tell me what?" Hazel insisted.

"Diamonds," Regina said, "don't burn."

"Not even in a hot fire like that one?"

"Not even in a volcano," Regina explained. "That's where diamonds are born, you know. The damned things are just about indestructible. As soon as Pauna and her pals remember that, they're going to lose interest in their frantic attempts to put out the diversionary fire I started just before we were brought out here to be tortured. I used the old delayed-action cigarette and matchbook gizmo they taught me in spy school, knowing the whole joint would burst into flames a few minutes after we left. But I didn't do it to *hide* the diamond. In fact, burning down the ranch will make it *easier* for them to find it. How are you coming with that rope, Randy dear?"

"Mmmmmmmph!" answered Randy.

"I don't understand," Hazel Ku cooed. "Where *did* you hide the Carioca Teardrop, anyhow?"

"I stuck it to the side of the bar with chewing gum," Regina explained. "Just after slipping it out of your purse during your argument with the late Dorian Studd-Passion Flowers. I thought they'd surely stumble over it when I saw the Geiger counter and learned the Carioca Teardrop was one of those icky radioactive deals. But they were too busy searching *people* to search the *room*. Of course, if they wait until the fire burns itself out, they only have to run the Geiger counter over the ashes and . . . Randy, I *do* wish you'd *hurry!*"

"Got one hand free," Randy panted. "I'll be loose in a minute."

"Make it ten seconds, darling. Pauna can't have us alive to spoil her act when the police and fire department arrive. They only have a few minutes to kill us and bury us, you know."

"You are wrong," a voice said from the darkness. "Pauna DeSilva is not coming back. Ever."

"Never?" blinked Regina, straining to identify the source of the mystery guest.

"Not never, not nohow," the strange yet somehow hauntingly familiar voice replied. "You see, I couldn't allow a golden opportunity like that to fire go to waste. So I took the liberty, just now, of shooting the young lady and her henchmen and pitching their bodies into the flames. Rather neat, what?"

"You *can't* be Dodsworth Doppelganger, the bit player Pauna DeSilva hired to impersonate G.I. Gottrocks?"

"Of course not. I shot him even before the others."

"Oh dear, you're not G.I. Gottrocks himself, are you?"

"He's not even in this book," the voice sniffed loftily.

"Well," Regina sighed, "I was hoping you wouldn't show up until a later chapter, when I had my hands free, with a gun and or the U.S Cavalry backing me up, but there's only one person left *for* you to be, isn't there?"

"Yes," the voice hissed from the darkness. "I am the killer wanted by every law-enforcement agency on Earth. I am that foul fiend of international intrigue and dirty deeds. That arch-master criminal of the universe. That simply terrible person . . . Are you ready, folks? . . . I am . . . heh heh heh, MEDUSA!"

"Shux," sniffed Randy Kidd. "After that buildup, I was expecting Jack The Ripper!"

"Jack's dead," muttered Medusa menacingly. "Just as you three will be, if I can figure out how this blasted machine gun works!"

"Having problems?" Randy asked, untying his left arm with his free right one. Medusa answered, "Ran out of my dumdum bullets back there by the ranchhouse and relieved one of the chaps I shot of his tommygun. But, dash it all, the bloody thing won't *shoot!*"

"You've got the safety on," Randy offered.

"Oh, come now, Mister Kidd!" Medusa sneered. "Not *that* old chestnut!"

"It's not a chestnut, it's a Uzzi. Safety catch on the Uzzi is a bit complicated. You see that little button in front of the trigger guard?"

"*Randy*, dear," Regina purred. "Will you please *shut up?*"

"This little button here?" Medusa asked.

"Yeah, you've got to . . ."

"*Randy!*" both girls shouted at once.

"Push it," Randy added, sitting up and starting to untie his ankles.

"Awfully decent of you to explain, considering," Medusa said, pushing the button indicated by his American advisor.

There was a metallic pingggg, followed by something that sounded like a tin can falling on the gravel at Medusa's feet as the murderous fiend muttered, "Oh dear, I must have pushed the wrong button!"

"Not if you pushed the one I told you to!" smiled Randy, getting up and moving forward on the balls of his naked feet. "That wasn't the safety switch, chum. That was the clip release!"

"Damn you!" Medusa sighed, bending over to pick up his ammunition. "I should have known you weren't on my side!"

"That's for sure," Randy grinned, kicking him in the head.

Medusa fell back, whimpering in mingled pain and frustrated rage as Randy moved in for the kill. In several swift bounds, the tall naked spy had disarmed the clothed and cussing killer and, holding him at bay with the Uzzi, bent over to untie Regina.

"Just a second, doll," he promised her grimly. "And we'll unmask Medusa."

"Shux," Medusa sighed.

"Untie *me!*" Hazel Ku cried. "I just felt something *crawling* on me!"

"Where?" asked Randy.

"Never mind *where!* It's *what* that I'm worried about! Like, I thought these red ants didn't get up until sunrise!"

"Relax, doll," Randy soothed. "It's probably just a tarantula."

"Help!" Hazel hollered. "I'm being attacked by a spider!"

"Really?" Randy blinked, untying Regina's wrists. "I didn't think spiders went in for that sort of thing. Just relax and enjoy it, while I untie you."

Regina, sitting up and working on the ropes around her own ankles, said, "Just let me get my feet loose, Randy, and you can hand me the machine gun."

Randy didn't answer. It's terribly hard to untie a girl when she's doing bumps and grinds on an ant hill. He didn't know what was bothering Hazel Ku from the Fuji Maru, but, whatever it was, it had her squirming all over the place. At last, however, he managed to free her staked-out right arm and, as Regina was now free of her own bonds, he handed the machine gun to the Blue Queen and concentrated on Hazel.

"And now, Mister Medusa," the Blue Queen said, rising proudly to her feet and training the gun on the silhouetted figure outlined against the firelight from the burning ranchhouse. "We shall see, once and for all, who, what, and so forth you actually are!"

The figure in black did not answer.

"Randy," Regina said. "You'll have to take off his mask and . . ." She blinked, suddenly aware of what Randy and Hazel Ku were up to, and added, "For crying out tears, Randy! Don't you *ever* think about anything else?"

"Sorry," Randy grunted. "Lost my head for a moment."

"Well, for God's sake," sighed Hazel Ku, "don't stop *now*, lover!"

"Sorry, doll," Randy sighed, getting to his feet. "But duty before pleasure. And all that jazz."

"Duty-schmooty," Hazel grumbled. "Also zim-zam and thank you ma'am. Couldn't your old Medusa have *waited* for a minute?"

"Afraid not," Randy sighed, walking over to the oddly silent figure outlined in the firelight. He was careful to keep out of Regina's line of fire as he bowed mockingly and asked, "You want to take that silly mask off, Medusa old buddy? Or shall I?"

The figure didn't answer.

"Sullen cuss, aren't you?" Randy muttered, reaching for the black phantom-of-the-opera-type mask and asking, "What happened to that papier-mâché Medusa mask you had in Rio, pal?"

Again no answer. The reason was obvious when Randy pulled the mask away to stare, blankly, at the brush-like head of a short joshua tree. He muttered, "Quelle the hell," and pulled the long black cloak away. More joshua tree. In the darkness and confusion, Medusa had simply draped his mask and cape over a nearby man-sized joshua tree and, as the others covered it with the Uzzi, dropped to the ground and slithered off amidst the waist-high desert scrub.

"Oh, darn!" said Regina.

"Double darn!" Randy agreed. "The fiend has escaped us again."

"Fiend?" swore Regina. "He's *worse* than a fiend. If I ever get my hands on him, I'll do something just *awful* to him!"

"Me too," Randy nodded. "He's a killer, a rat fink, and the enemy of the free world."

"He's worse than that!" snapped Regina. "Do you know what he did, while we were tied, helpless and exposed on these ant hills?"

"What, aside from shooting Pauna DeSilva and her henchmen, did this foul fiend perpetrate?" asked Randy.

Regina held up the blue brocaded gown the defunct Miss DeSilva had allowed her to carry with her to the place of anticution and wailed, "The dirty rat tied knots in our clothes!"

Chapter SIXTEEN

"IT'S YOUR THEORY, then," Randy Kidd was saying, as he and Regina and Hazel Ku lounged near the edge of their hotel pool the following afternoon, "that it was Pauna DeSilva and not the real Medusa who tried to scare us with that papier-mâché Medusa mask down in Rio?"

"Of course," Regina nodded. "Remember how Lieutenant DePussa identified the two bodies they fished out of Guanabra Bay as belonging to a couple of local hoods? Pauna was interested in recovering the family diamond and, knowing the infamous Medusa was mixed up in the case, tried to divert suspicion his way when she came to kidnap me."

"Okay. And, after we messed up her hired hoods, she shot them to keep them from talking. Nice kid. Only, why did she want to kidnap you in the first place?"

"At the time, she thought *we* had something to do with her father's death. She liked her father, even if she did have homicidal tendencies toward just about everybody else. She must have known Hazel, here, had the diamond and figured to swap me for the Carioca Teardrop."

"Figures," Randy shrugged. "Okay. That accounts for just about everything that happened in Rio de Janeiro."

"Not quite. We still don't know who shot Senhor DeSilva and stole the diamond in the first place. At least, we don't know for sure, although I've got a pretty good idea!"

"Who else but our friend from last night, old Medusa himself?" Randy shrugged. "He found out, somehow, that Murgatroid Schnook was meeting Senhor DeSilva

and set a trap for the two of them. First he shot DeSilva, ordy, somehow, Margatroid managed to escape with the diamond, even though Medusa wounded him and . . ."

"But why did somebody steal his body?" Regina frowned.

"To cover the fact that he'd been killed?" Randy mused.

"*Why*, for crying out tears? I mean, look at the way all the other bodies were scattered across the landscape with gay abandon! Voddie Ville, Dirty Dick, poor twisted Pop Weezle, the two wounded hoods, even total strangers unlucky enough to be mistaken for one of us? Why should they go to all that trouble to hide Murgatroid's murder? I mean, of all the people killed in this caper, he was the *least* likely to cause the murderer any trouble!"

"There was a reward for Margatroid." Hazel Ku volunteered. "Interpol had offered ten thousand dollars for poor Murgie-wurgie, dead or alive!"

"Why didn't *you* knock him off, Una, I mean Hazel?" Randy asked in sudden interest.

"I'm not that sort of a girl," Hazel sniffed.

Randy dabbled his toes in the tepid water of the pool and thought about things for a while before he smiled brightly and said, "Maybe *that's* why they've hidden Selnook's stiff! Maybe, after Medusa gets his hands on the Carioca Teardrop, he intends to turn Murgatroid's body over to Interpol and collect the reward."

"It's pretty risky," Regina objected. "And rather penny-ante for a man with a three-million-dollar diamond."

"It would keep him in cigarettes for a while," Randy frowned. "And he hasn't got the diamond, remember?"

"Where is the Carioca Teardrop, Regina?" Hazel Ku asked, sitting up in renewed animation as the subject of a girl's best friend came up again.

Regina yawned and said, "I knew, as soon as those nice

state troopers let me sift the ashes for the Litty engagement ring I told them I'd lost, that Medusa would be coming back for another try at getting his poisonous paws on it. So, as soon as I found it, I hid it!"

"Not on you," Hazel frowned, with an envious glance at the figure inside the Blue Queen's aquamarine bikini. She sighed and added, "If you were hiding anything larger than a black-eyed pea inside that bathing suit, we'd be able to see it!"

"You'll never guess," Regina laughed.

"Somewhere in your room?" Hazel probed.

"Is that such a hot idea, doll?" Randy asked in a worried tone. "I mean, these hotel locks are easy to open and the damned thing *is* radioactive. Like, if Medusa was to come busting into your pad with a Geiger counter and I . . ."

"It's very near where you are sitting," Regina cut in. "Medusa won't be able to pick it up without exposing himself to our unwavering gaze!"

"Just a minute!" Hazel Ku cried. "Are you saying it's *here*, near the pool?"

"You might say that," Regina smiled cryptically.

"*Might* say it? You *did* say it!" Hazel muttered. Her eyes moved uncertainly around the nearly deserted pool and then her jaw dropped and she gasped, "by George, I think I've got it!"

"You have?" Randy blinked. "Well, for Pete's sake, let *me* in on the secret!"

"A diamond," said Hazel Ku coyly, "is not only a girl's best friend but, if it's what they call a diamond of the first water, and you put it *in* water, it's *invisible!*"

"Invisible?" frowned Randy.

"Not only that, but you can't see it. And so, since Regina hasn't got it on her (as anyone can see), there's only one place around here it could be!"

"The pool!" Randy smiled. It was a statement, not a question.

Regina merely smiled, a trifle smugly, as the other two stared at the wide expanse of shimmering blue-green water.

"That pool is over a hundred feet long and about fifty feet across," Randy mused. "Assuming you dropped it in the deep end, that still leaves a hell of a lot of water for even a good-sized gem like the Carioca Teardrop to lose itself in."

"Why the deep end?" asked Hazel Ku.

"Someone might step on it if it were in the part where people walk. Right, Regina?"

"It's not in the shallow end," Regina admitted with a yawn.

Randy frowned at the chlorinated ripples under the diving board and muttered, "I can see how it's a safe place. But surely you can't leave it where it is overnight? I mean, the pool closes in a little while and . . ."

"And Medusa will stand out like a sore thumb if he tries to recover it," Regina cut in. She pointed upward and added, "My room overlooks the pool. I have a scope-sighted gun in my steamer trunk and our masked outlaw will look silly as the dickens standing around down in his cape with a Geiger counter."

"You know what?" Randy marveled. "I think you've got something. How long do you intend to leave it there on the bottom of the pool?"

"At least until Thursday. I've wired that nice Lieutenant in Rio, and he's catching a jet up here to recover the DeSilva family jewels and, incidentally, give us the reward posted by poor parboiled Pauna's big brother. I *do* hope, however, the Rio police get here before Thursday, though. I'd hate to have to find another hiding place."

"Why?" asked Hazel. "What happens on Thursday?"

"That's the day they drain the pool to clean it," Regina explained.

"Gleep!" gasped Randy. "If the diamond went down that grate in the bottom of the pool, we'd never see it again!"

"Oh, it's not that bad," Regina smiled. "You don't think I'd have stashed it in the water without checking on things like that, do you?"

"You mean, there's a way of recovering it if it went down the drain?"

"Certainly. There's a large drain trap in the hotel cellar. Diamonds are quite heavy, you know. If the current carried it down the drain, it would settle in the trap, where it could be recovered by unscrewing this big old rusty plug. But it would be an awfully *icky* job and the hotel people might ask all sorts of questions before they let us monkey with the plumbing like that! So let's hope we get rid of the darned old diamond before they drain the pool on Thursday!"

"Amen," sighed Randy. "Where are *you* going, Hazel baby?"

"I'll be right back," Hazel Ku cooed. "I just remembered I left my sun-tan oil in my pad."

"That's funny," Randy muttered, as he stared thoughtfully at Hazel Ku's well stacked back. "I could have sworn she was just *using* her sun-tan oil, a few minutes before we got on the subject of diamonds."

"Let her go, Randy," Regina murmured. "She wants to use the phone."

"She does? Then why didn't she say so?"

"Simply because she doesn't want us to know about her call."

"Private, eh? Are you trying to tell me Hazel's trying to two-time yours truly?"

"Not in the way you may think, Randy-wandy. She's about to call her boyfriend, but it's not to make a date for musical bedrooms. It's something more important than sex!"

"Nothing," said Randy Kidd, "is more important than sex! Who is this rat fink who'd dare to diddle my darling?"

"Relax, Romeo," Regina replied. "Like, he saw her first. So, if anybody's hanging horns on anyone else, you might claim the honors. Hazel's calling her old friend and bazoom companion, literally, *Medusa!*"

Randy blinked a couple of blinks and blurted, "*Who?*"

"Medusa," Regina nodded. "Hand me that emery board like a lover, will you? I seem to have picked up a hangnail in my rough road through life."

Randy Kidd fumbled amongst Regina's effects, found the emery board and, recovering his cool, handed it to her with the observation that he thought Hazel Ku was a *nice* girl.

"Not as nice as she would have all and sundry believe," Regina smiled, coolly filing her nails. "I've suspected her for some time of being less innocent than she pretends to be. No woman with a wiggle like that *can* be as innocent as she pretends to be!"

"Besides," agreed Randy in sudden thought. "We're running out of suspects. We've been popping people off like the last act of Hamlet!"

"Not *we*, dear. *They*. Passion Flowers murdered all sorts of people to keep us from finding out she was a he, and then Pauna DeSilva knocked a mess off in her madcap scheme to recover her daddy's diamond, and . . ."

"I just thought of something," cut in Randy. "If Pauna's daddy owned the thing in the first place, why did she have to kill so many people? Like, couldn't she have just claimed it as her own property?"

"Where? At the lost-and-found window at Union Station? Besides, I'm not really sure she *was* trying to *recover* it. If what I suspect is true, Pauna's plot may have been a bit more complicated than it seemed at first glance."

"Meanwhile," Randy interrupted, "While we're chit-

chatting, our treacherous little chickarina, Hazel Ku from the Fuji Maru, is giving a clue to you know who!"

"Poop-poop-ee-doo!" laughed Regina. "That's the general idea!"

"You mean, you *wanted* her to spill the beans to her buddy-boy?"

"But of course. How else are we ever going to catch the dirty rotten rat fink and unravel the riddle of the mask of Medusa?"

"You think he'll try for the diamond, then?"

"Natch. And we'll be waiting for him, her, it, etcetera."

"I hope you're right, doll puss. But we're going to look awfully silly if, somehow, Medusa purloins the Carioca Teardrop from the pool."

"Don't worry, he won't."

"You sound certain."

"I am. You see, I told a little fib. Well, not really a fib. I never actually *said* I put the pebble in the pool, if you'll ponder the point!"

"Egad! Also zooks! You mean you've baited the trap with tripe? The Carioca Teardrop is *not* on the bottom of the pool?"

"Of course not. Honestly, Randy, did you really think I'd be silly enough to plonk a three-million dollar diamond in the drink?"

"It did sound sort of chancey. But . . . where is it, if you haven't got it on you?"

"Don't ask. Suffice to say, it's where I can put a finger on it at a moment's notice."

"Hmm," Randy hummed. "If it's not *on* you, could it be *in* . . ."

"I'm not going to *tell* you," Regina blushed.

"You don't have to," Randy grinned. "I can guess! And you know what, doll? I wouldn't count on Medusa not being as good a guesser as I am."

"Let's hope he has a cleaner mind," sniffed Regina.

"He won't have. Not if he's a man. I wonder, though, if he's going to enjoy searching for it as much as I think *I* would!"

"Neither one of you is going to do any such thing," sniffed Regina, a trifle primly, all things considered. "Not as long as *I* have anything to say about it!"

"True," Randy nodded, soberly. "But if Medusa gets the drop on you again, you may not have anything to say about it."

"In that case," Regina frowned, "I'd better make sure he doesn't *get* the drop on me."

"That might not be easy!" Randy warned. "According to people who know him, Medusa managed to kill an awful lot of people who didn't have any more intention of dying than you do at this particular minute. Medusa has a pretty nasty edge on you, when you think about it."

"I *am* thinking about it," Regina muttered. "What edge is it that he, she, or it, has over me?"

"Simple," Randy shrugged. "Like, Medusa knows who you are, and where he can find you. But we don't have a clue as to who Medusa is, or when and where he intends to strike!"

At that moment there was a piercing scream, followed by the sound of shots. Randy looked wordlessly at Regina for a moment and then he stammered, "That . . . that sounded like Hazel Ku!"

"From the Fuji Maru," agreed Regina. "And you know what, lover? I think we *do* know where Medusa intended to strike again now!"

Chapter SEVENTEEN

HAZEL KU, late of the Fuji Maru was an awful mess. The dumdum bullets had hit her in the back of the head and come out the front, taking her face with them and spattering blood, brains, makeup, and false eyelashes all over the wall near the telephone table in Hazel's room.

Randy glanced down at the headset gripped tightly in the dead girl's hand and observed, "She made the call, just as you said she would. Only Medusa caught up with her before she finished talking to him."

"Stop and *think* a minute, lover," Regina objected. "How could Medusa shoot her while he was talking to her on the phone?"

"Well, somebody shot her, and you said yourself that you expected her to go right to the phone and dial M for Medusa!"

"She did," Regina nodded. "And she told Medusa about the diamond. But that first call couldn't have taken her more than a few moments. Notice, however, that she's still holding onto the phone?"

Randy thought about that and shrugged. "She was calling somebody else?"

"When Medusa walked in on her," Regina nodded. "He must be staying here in the hotel or someplace close by. Our little Eurasian chum, having tipped Medusa off to when and where he could recover the Carioca Teardrop, was in the act of tipping somebody *else* off about the trap they were setting up, between them, for our masked menace!"

"And he caught her!" Randy said flatly. It was a state-

ment of fact, not a question. Hazel Ku, alias Una Hu, had paid with her life for her tricky treacherous twistiness.

"All right," a bull-like voice bellowed. "What's going on in here? What was all the noise about . . . Gleep!"

It was the house detective—a large man with a face like a frog and, at the moment, a complexion to match. He pointed a wavering finger at the mingled corpse and asked, "Is she . . . dead?"

"Why no," Randy replied in a disgusted voice. "She's just removed her makeup, the hard way. You'd better call the local fuzz, friend. You've got a fiend on your premises."

"I hope you've got an alibi, buster," the house dick declared.

"The best," Randy replied. "Like I was down at the pool when the shots were fired and, if you will kindly regard the fact that I am wearing a bathing suit, you will note I am not armed with anything that shoots dumdum bullets."

"Nor I, officer honey," Regina dimpled. "So, now that we've seen the terrible tragedy, it's time to say toodles."

There was no objection forthcoming from the human bullfrog as Regina and Randy eased their way out of Hazel's room through the gathering crowd in the doorway.

"I think," Regina whispered, as she and Randy walked along the hall, "that we'd better see about getting dressed."

"Good idea," Randy agreed. "It's devilishly hard to carry a gun in a shoulder holster while wearing a bathing suit, unless one does not mind answering lots of foolish questions."

They walked to the elevator shaft on the mezzanine floor of the hotel, overlooking the velvety swoop of a marble stairway leading down into the lobby. Regina pushed the "up" button and fidgeted, impatiently, as the bronze needle over the elevator door slowly crawled

down from the top floors. At last the needle indicated the great brass cage was approaching them, and she and Randy stepped closer, gazing expectantly at the closed doors of the elevator shaft.

The elevator doors opened. A body fell out.

"Oops," said Randy. "Something dropped somebody!"

"Something like a dumdum bullet," Regina nodded, gazing down thoughtfully at the uniformed corpse of the elevator operator. The floor of the otherwise empty cage was slicked with gore and the slender young man in the maroon uniform was badly mangled. The Blue Queen was able to tell, from the position of the body and the blood on the knees of his maroon pants, that the elevator operator had been shot several times in the chest as he slammed the door of the elevator in somebody's face. Somebody who hadn't wanted to walk down. The elevator boy had died almost instantly, but, falling to his knees, had clung to the control lever and dropped the cage as far as the mezzanine before letting go and allowing the automatic safety controls to brake the cage to a stop and open the doors.

"It must have been Medusa," Randy muttered. "But why would he want to shoot the elevator boy? Could *this* have been who Hazel was in cahoots with?"

"I doubt it," said the Blue Queen. "In the first place, there's no telephone in this elevator. In the second, unless my memory fails me, this is the same elevator boy they had working here a year ago when we were playing that club date on the Sunset Strip!"

"Medusa must have had some reason for killing him, though," Randy mused. But before the Blue Queen could answer, there was a ghastly male scream of pure terror and a nude descended the stairs beside the elevator shaft!

"Help me!" the nude cried to Regina. Since it was a man, it had the right idea in not asking the Blue Queen's sidekick to notice its predicament. There was something vaguely familiar about the unhappy young man in the

altogether, but, before Randy could place the face, the naked man cocked his head and hissed, "Listen! Do you hear footsteps on the stairs?"

"I sure do, naked honey!" Regina frowned.

Randy heard them, too. It sounded like somebody galloping down the stairs two at a time in heavy shoes. Fast.

"He's still after me!" the naked man whimpered, dodging around Regina to run for the grand staircase to the lobby. Before the Blue Queen or her faithful companion had time to discuss this unusual development, there was a black blur of motion and a caped figure in a black silk mask dashed down the steps just vacated by the naked and barefoot runner and hissed, "Which way did he go?"

"Uh," said Regina, catching sight of the king-sized pistol in the masked man's black-gloved hand.

"Gah!" added Randy helpfully.

Ignoring the Uh, as well as the Gah, the masked figure, who they now had every reason to suspect just might be Medusa, said, "Ahah! Tallyho!" and galloped after the naked youth who, by this time, was halfway down the stairway to the crowded and somewhat flabbergasted lobby.

It was as far as he got, alive.

"Splat, splat, splat," spat the silencer-equipped pistol in Medusa's hand as the latter bounded to the head of the stairs.

"Oh, damn!" cried the naked man on the stairway, doing two cartwheels, a somersault, and a one-and-a-half gainer over the marble bannister to land with a limp soggy thud between a potted Boston fern and a half-potted gentleman reading the London *Times* in an overstuffed leather armchair. The Boston fern made no comment but, as women fainted, men screamed, and Medusa cackled in maniacal glee, the elderly gentleman looked up and muttered, "Nice shot."

"And now my foes and now my friends," hissed Medusa, slowly turning toward the spot he'd last seen oc-

cupied by his arch-enemies, the Blue Queen and Randy Kidd, "I shall deal with the two of you with my remaining deadly dumdums!"

Alas for Medusa, his best-laid plans ganged agly. For, as Medusa raised his muzzle, he was greeted by the sight of the thick bronze elevator doors closing in his face.

"I hope," the Blue Queen sighed, as dumdum bullets spanged off the door inside her head, "that this thing can climb faster than Medusa can run upstairs!"

It could, but only just. As they reached their floor, and Randy stopped the cage with a crack about, "Fourteenth floor, ladies and gentlemen's ready-to-wear shoulder holsters," there was the sound of someone huffing, puffing, and making pornographic comments on details of Regina and Randy's anatomy, ancestry, and sex lives he couldn't possibly have known about.

"Quick!" the Blue Queen snapped. "In my room, before he makes it to the landing!"

Not waiting to see if her sidekick was following her or not, the Blue Queen dashed headlong down the hall while Randy, to afford a bit of distraction, rolled a sand filled cigarette urn down the stairwell in the direction of Medusa's huffing and puffing. The urn made a frightful racket as it bumped down the marble treads, scattering cigarette butts and sand in its wake. Randy would have liked to hear Medusa's comments on the plunging juggernaut, but he didn't have time to stick around and be shot. Rushing down the hall toward Regina's room, he spotted the Blue Queen in the open doorway with a brace of pistols. Regina threw one of them in an underhanded pass and hollered, "Catch!"

The yell was entirely superfluous as Randy, snagging it in mid-flight, whirled in his tracks, dropped to one knee in the center of the hall runner and, as Medusa popped up onto the landing, smoothly snicked off the safety and fired.

"No fair!" Medusa wailed, dropping back down the

stairwell as Randy snapped off another shot and, bounding to his feet, ran back the way he'd just come.

He and Medusa traded shots once more as Randy spotted the masked phantom whipping around a lower bend of the stairwell. The dumdum fired by the masked murderer whipped harmlessly over Randy's head, while Randy's superior marksmanship zipped a slug through the fluttering cloak of the vanishing Medusa who, now that his intended victim had armed himself, was having second thoughts about the whole thing.

"Randy!" Regina called from behind him. "Come back, Randy! He'll be in a position to ambush you if you follow too closely."

"I'll show him a thing or two about ambushing," the angry Randy swore, taking the sand strewn steps two at a time. He tore out of the stairwell and into the hallway of the floor below, almost colliding with a battered and bewildered looking man he'd never seen before. The latter was cut across the forehead and asked, in a dazed voice, "I say, are you looking for a chap in a black mask and cape?"

"Which way did he go?" Randy nodded.

"Thataway!" the stranger snapped, pointing at a nearby door that was slightly ajar. "He hit me with something and dashed into that doorway!"

"Thanks!" Randy smiled, moving in on the slightly open doorway with his gun ready. Without waiting to be invited, he opened the action by snapping off three shots as he moved in on the ominously silent doorway. There was no answering fire. Either there was another way out, or he'd nailed Medusa with those three waist-level shots through the opening. Randy told the man behind him to keep back as he went over, took the knob in one hand, and, gun in the other, whipped open the door.

"What the hell?" muttered Randy Kidd, staring into the small cubbyhole. "It's a broom closet!"

"Yes," laughed the man behind him, pushing Randy

head-first into the broom closet and slamming the door behind him. "So it is! And now, sucker, this is where you get yours!"

Randy swore as he dropped to the floor of the narrow broom closet. But, fortunately, he dropped faster than he swore. The bullets Medusa put through the door were all at least an inch or so above his quivering flesh as he lay there on the floor amidst the mop-heads and furniture polish, cursing himself for falling into Medusa's childishly simple trap and hoping the latter would not think to fire a few low rounds for luck.

It got rather quiet after a while. Randy lay there, sweating and trying not to breath too loud, as he wondered what his next move was.

After a million years had gone by a voice called, "Randy?"

It was the Blue Queen.

"I'm in here!" Randy called sheepishly. "In this fershloggen broom closet!"

It took them a few moments to open the bullet-riddled door without a key, but, in the end, a shamefaced Randy stood in the hall, explaining to the now fully clad Blue Queen and her bull-frog-faced detective friend, who turned out to be a character named Porterhouse Dix, how he'd been suckered into a head-first dive into a broom closet by the very man he was chasing!

"You say," said Porterhouse Dix, "that you actually saw this guy, Medusa, without his mask?"

"Yeah," Randy nodded. "And I was too dumb to realize the mark on his head that he said he'd gotten from Medusa was the crease I made in his quick-thinking skull with one of my own bullets!"

"What did he look like, Randy?" asked Regina.

"Just a guy-type guy. Seemed to have a British accent. But we already knew that. He was about the same age and type as old I.C. Hands. Had grayish hair, a knock-around face. Must have been around fiftyish. And that's no news, either, if the cat I saw was Medusa. Like, he's

been shooting people since before World War Two. In other words, Medusa looks just like you'd *expect* a middle-aged murderer to look!"

"It figures," Regina nodded.

"Here's part of his cape," Porterhouse Dix was saying, fingering a black length of silk he'd found on a nearby windowsill. The detective looked out the window and whistled, "Whoooooie!" He marveled, "Thirteen stories without a net! Looks like your masked marvel climbed out this window, after locking Mister Kidd in the closet, and somehow made his way to another window opening **onto this courtyard!"**

"He's supposed to be a human fly," Regina nodded, joining the detective to gaze down at the pool, shimmering and deserted at this hour in the courtyard below.

"Probably crawled along that teeny little ledge to poor young DeSilva's room, on this same floor," Dix declared. "He'd know it was empty and it's only a few yards along the ledge. Doubt we'll find him there now but I'll check."

"*DeSilva's* room?" Randy blinked, as he suddenly remembered where he'd seen the naked young man on the stairs before. "That was Pauna DeSilva's brother, wasn't it!"

"That was who Hazel Ku was in cahoots with," explained the Blue Queen. "She was watching us for her friend and lover, the arch-fiend known to Interpol and other ignorant people as Medusa, and, being a girl with a hand for money, she was spying on Medusa for the DeSilva family. There was a reward for the recovery of the Carioca Teardrop, if you'll remember."

"I *do* remember," Randy nodded. "And so, when she set Medusa up to recover the jewel from us, she double crossed him and set young DeSilva up to recover it from **Medusa?"**

"She tried, but Medusa was too smart for her. Or maybe he was just going to blip her on general principle. After all, having smuggled the diamond into the States, thanks to our help and the story about it being the lens of the

secret Hu Ray, Medusa really had no further use for Hazel, and she did know an awful lot, including his true identity!"

"Well," welled Porterhouse Dix. "I daresay we've seen the last of the creep for now. I've called the police and the place is crawling with fuzz. Your friend, Medusa, won't dare show his face around here any more, with or without a mask, now that Mister Kidd's seen him in the flesh and can identify him!"

"I hope you're wrong," the Blue Queen sighed. "Randy, dear, don't you think you ought to dress for dinner? Or just to keep from catching cold?"

"Good idea," smiled Randy Kidd. "I'll be in my room if you need me."

"The police will want to talk to both of you," said Porterhouse Dix. "I wouldn't make any plans on leaving the hotel if I were either one of you."

"Don't worry, Dixie-wixie," Regina purred, her eyes glistening as she gazed down into the courtyard at something only she, with her keen eyes, had noticed. "I don't think it will prove at all necessary to leave the hotel for what *I* have in mind."

Chapter EIGHTEEN

THE BLUE QUEEN was dressed in black. Black slacks, black sweater, and black scarf over her platinum-blond hair as she moved like a graceful black panther on rubber-soled sneakers, a wicked-looking little Belgian Browning .25 in her black-gloved hand.

It was late, and very dark in the damp cellar as she slithered along the dripping cement walls of the lower levels. She dared not use a light and depended on her almost feline vision as she tiptoed in the direction of a loud gargLish sound, somewhere in the dank depths down below the pool's plumbing.

The sound of running water grew louder as she listened, and the Blue Queen smiled in slightly sinister enjoyment as she slithered onward. Her trap had worked. Hazel Ku had managed to tell Medusa about the diamond in the pool before the masked murderer rubbed her out. He was somewhere ahead of her, crouched in the darkness, draining the pool and searching the trap for the Carioca Teardrop! It was the water level, slowly dropping down the smooth blue tile sides of the pool, that Regina had spotted from the window on the thirteenth floor.

Anyhow, Regina was very smart and she'd seen the water dropping and, while Randy was changing into some clothes, the Blue Queen decided to whip down to the cellar and catch Medusa so they could go to dinner.

Regina tripped over something that went plonk, not very loud, but still very scary. She froze in her tracks, gun ready for anything. But, after a while, when nobody came and the water in the drains kept going "Glugidy-

glugidyglugidyglug," she decided it was safe to proceed with her prowling.

Slowly, Regina eased open the door to the filter room. There was a teeny-weeny light from a candle burning fitfully on an overturned toolbox near the main drain. The pipe from the pool was black and wet, glistening in the flickering light as the water inside it chugalagged down into the sewers or someplace. Regina wasn't too interested at the moment in the pipes. She was more worried about the dark figure, in a cape and black Greta Garbo hat, who crouched in a sinister-looking black huddle over the open pit of the sewer trap like some old witch!

"I've got you covered, Medusa!" the Blue Queen said, raising her pistol to cover the sinister figure near the trap.

"That's what *you* think, my dear," a cold voice answered in a cobra hiss that echoed eerily in the darkness of the cellar.

"I don't wish to appear a party pooper," Regina replied coolly, "but you won't find the Carioca Teardrop in that trap. And, I might add, if you don't stand up and raise both hands, rather slowly, I intend to blow your brains out from under that silly-looking hat!"

"Why don't you try?" Medusa answered in an amused tone.

"They're your brains," Regina smiled, firing from the hip.

The Greta Garbo hat flew across the room like a big fluttering bat. Otherwise, there wasn't the slightest movement from the black figure huddled over the hole in the floor. Regina walked toward it, firing a couple more times as she did so, and not getting any dramatic results in the process. She stood over what seemed to be now headless Medusa and, taking the cloak by the collar, yanked it off.

There was nothing under it but a wooden chair, slightly damaged, thanks to a few divots taken out of its bentwood frame by the Blue Queen's bullets. Regina sighed, gazing down at the chair someone had hurriedly

tossed a cloak and hat over and muttered, "You certainly have an awful mess of these darned old cloaks, Medusa!"

"I have a tailor in London who whips them up a gross at a time," the sinister voice slithered as the overhead lights went on and the real Medusa, stepping out from behind a chlorine tank, said, "Surprise!"

There was a very large gun in his hand.

"I believe," smiled Medusa (or at least he sounded as if he was smiling. It was hard to tell under that mask) "that the game is about over, my lovely chessmistress." He raised the muzzle of his gun and added, "This is where I say 'checkmate'!"

"Not unless you want 'checkmate' to be your famous last word, Medusa honey," the Blue Queen purred. Raising her own gun a fraction of an inch to cover a spot somewhere between the masked menace's hidden eyebrows, she waited until she was sure he recognized the thing in her hand for the deadly toy it was before she added, "Looks more like stalemate to me! I can't shoot you without getting killed in the process, and vice versa!"

"Hmmm! You may *have* something," Medusa mused. "What do you suggest we do about it, my dear?"

"Nothing. I suggest we just cover each other until we *think* of something."

"I've already thought of something," Medusa complained.

"What's that, Medusy-woosy?"

"It has occurred to me, my dear, that if I stand here like a ruddy bird, staring down the barrel of that glorified cigarette lighter, it's only a question of time before that blasted confederate of yours comes looking for you!"

"Oh darn," the Blue Queen sighed. "I was hoping you *wouldn't* think of that!"

"A chap jolly well *has* to think, in *my* business," Medusa smiled.

"Well, don't think any thunks about pulling that trigger," the Blue Queen warned. "I only have to last long

enough to pull mine and you're going to be missing some gray matter!"

"I say," Medusa sputtered. "This *is* a sticky wicket! I mean, I *can't* just stand here until your friend arrives and, thanks to some bad habits I picked up in my youth, I'm afraid *I* have no friends. But I shan't be taken alive, you know. I mean, if they get *me*, *I* get *you*, what?"

"Hmmmm," frowned Regina. "I don't like *that* idea for sour beans. Mind if *I* make a suggestion?"

"Does it involve my giving myself up to be hanged?"

"They get you in this state. But it involves me going my way and you going yours."

"Just like that? No tricks?"

"What tricks?" the Blue Queen smiled innocently. "I'll back out this door, keeping you covered, and you can back out that other door on the far side of the room. How does that grab you?"

"Rather better than being potted between the eyes," Medusa murmured. "And I can always make another try for the diamond at a more opportune moment, what?"

"If you want to waste your time on a zircon." Regina shrugged, backing toward the door she'd entered by.

Still covering Regina with his own pistol, Medusa started edging toward the door she'd indicated. Then he gasped and said, "I say, did you say a *zircon*? I mean, we *are* talking about the Carioca Teardrop, aren't we?"

"We are," the Blue Queen nodded, taking another step back. "The jewel you shot Senhor DeSilva for, and went to all that trouble to smuggle into the country via Hazel Ku and the phony story of the Hu Ray, was nothing but a big zircon!"

"That . . . that's preposterous! Pauna DeSilva *killed* for it. Her brother offered several thousand dollars to Hazel Ku for it!"

"That's what first made me suspect it was a fake," Regina nodded. "You see, Hazel Ku told me she was an expert on diamonds. That made me wonder how innocent

she could be, if she'd claimed to think the Carioca Teardrop was the lens of a laser gun. Then, when she tried to double-cross you by selling a *three million dollar* gem for a few thousand dollars' reward, I took the trouble of testing the so-called diamond myself. It won't even **cut window glass!"**

"Egad!" Medusa muttered. "All that blood and crud and Ginsberg didn't even get to ride tonight! But, tell me, Blue Queen, what ever happened to the *real* Carioca **Teardrop?"**

"That," Regina shrugged, "is a good question. I imagine the DeSilvas hocked it, back when the Brazilian rubber boom went blooey. Their credit's a bit on the flakey side as it is, and, if it had gotten around that their family jewels were as phony as the Ha Ray they wanted to buy in order to recoup the family fortunes, they wouldn't have been able to charge a six-pack of beer any **more!"**

"Well, c'est la goddam guerre!" Medusa sighed. "Now that we know there's no Ha Ray and no three million dollar diamond, we haven't anything to fight about, have **we?"**

"Just a few murders, Medusa honey."

"You'd turn me in for a little thing like that?"

"You bet your bird, lover. I like, I'm a very public-spirited type when it comes to people like you. I mean, fun's fun, lover, but you're just too much!"

"Well, in that case, I shall have to escape," Medusa laughed. "Once I go through this door, you'll never see me again, since there's no reason to hang around any **more!"**

"Medusa, honey," Regina purred, stepping backwards out the thick metal door to the filter room. "This is your very last chance to *surrender*, you know."

"Surrender?" Medusa laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, my dear. From where you now stand, you can't hit me."

"I know, and you can't hit *me*, either, Medusy woosy. But, from where I'm standing, I can put a bullet right

through that tank of chlorine you were behind when I came in. Do I have to remind you that chlorine is a deadly gas?"

"Not at all," Medusa snorted. "I've used it myself, on occasion. As I understand it, Regina. You threaten to plunk a bullet into yon tank, releasing deadly fumes of chlorine into this little filter room?"

"You've got it right on your first reading, honey."

"Shoot and be damned, then!" jeered the masked killer in a confident tone. "When you puncture the tank and step out that door, I'll merely step out this other door and be on my merry way. You won't even be able to follow me until the fumes clear away! Hah hah and stuff!"

"Well," Regina shrugged, "I warned you."

She fired her pistol through the crack of the door. There was a loud hissing from the punctured chlorine tank and the room started to fill with dense clouds of the deadly green gas. Just before Regina closed and locked the filter-room door she heard the other door, across the room, opening. "Goodbye, Blue Queen!" laugned Medusa. Then his laughter died away as he swore rather dreadfully and sobbed, "Damn it to hell! This seems to be another *broom closet!*"

"I know," the Blue Queen answered, slamming the door and throwing the bolt. "I knew *that* when I *made* the deal!"

It took quite a while before it was safe to enter the filter room. By that time, of course, Randy, Porterhouse Dix, and a whole herd of fuzz had appeared on the scene. Regina expained how she'd trapped the killer known only as Medusa in the gas-filled filter room and the frog-faced detective shuddered as her words sank in.

"What a way to die!" gasped Porterhouse Dix. "He was killed by poison gas. Suffocated like a rat in a trap."

"Or a murderer in the gas chamber," Regina yawned. "I only saved the State of California the trouble of treating him like another chessman." She blinked at Randy

and added, "The Blue Queen checkmated the opposition and treated him like a chessman. Rather puny, don't you think?"

"You have an odd sense of humor at times, doll," Randy shuddered. "Still, he *did* deserve the death you dealt him, whoever he was."

"That's something we'll all know in a few moments," one of the Los Angeles detectives smiled grimly. "Every law enforcement agency in the world has been trying to learn the identity of this international assassin for oodles of years!"

"The gas seems to be pretty well abated," another said. "Let's go in there and drag him out!"

And that's just what they did. Two detectives, putting handkerchiefs over their faces, dashed in and each grabbed one of Medusa's feet. They pulled him out into the less-chlorinated part of the cellar and, as the others waited breathlessly (it wasn't that easy to breath, you know, with all that chlorine Regina had let fly), they stripped away Medusa's black silk mask to reveal the mild features of a middle aged man with a tanged up forehead and a rather unhappy look on his dead face.

"That's the guy I ran into in the hall," Randy explained. "The guy who . . . shoved me in the broom closet!"

"And who, despite his years," added Porterhouse Dix, "must have been a superb athlete to crawl like a human fly along the sheer sides of this hotel to safety!"

"That's nothing," Regina shrugged. "You should have seen how he slid down a pipe in a driving rainstorm at my hotel in Rio de Janeiro."

"Slid down a pipe?" Randy marveled. "You mean that *this* . . ."

"Is the Spy Who Came In from the Copa. Murgatroid Schnook!"

"But . . . Murgatroid Schnook's *dead!*" Randy objected. "He was one of Medusa's first victims!"

"That's what he wanted everybody to *think!*" Regina nodded. "He was hotter than a two-dollar pistol in Rio, even *before* he murdered Senhor DeSilva for what he thought was a three-million-dollar diamond. He knew he'd never be able to get out of Brazil with the Carioca Teardrop, a beautiful Eurasian girlfriend, and the plans for the phony Hu Ray he was trying to con all sorts of people into buying. So, he deliberately exposed himself to us, pretending to have been wounded and acting like he was dying and all that jazz. Then, while the police, tricked by his confederate, I.C. Hands, came banging on my door, he made like a human fly to the bottom of the airshaft, smearing lots of catsup or whatever he was using for blood all over the place and making like a stiff when I looked out the window!"

"I get it!" Randy gasped. "He played corpse just long enough to fool you and then, when you were on your way downstairs, he just got up and walked away."

"Yes," Regina sighed. "And the rain washed away his fake blood in the airshaft, just like I wasted all that time washing it out of the hotel room. He certainly put us to a lot of trouble!"

"But, Mister Kidd," frowned Porterhouse Dix, "how come, when you saw him in the hall, you didn't recognize him?"

"Randy never *saw* Margatroid Schnook, remember?" said Regina.

"I don't," sighed the frog-faced detective. "But I'll take your word for it." He looked down at the dead killer and sighed, "So many people have died at the hands of this cold-blooded fiend. It seems unbelievable his nefarious career has come to a halt."

"He got careless," Regina shrugged. "That's the trouble with mass murderers, they tend to get sloppy after they've been killing people for a while."

"If he hadn't killed that poor guy on the plane," Randy agreed, "we'd never have gotten into the act. The death

of that British agent, Fallingham, panicked I.C. Hands into getting *us* involved and then, when Voddie Ville was murdered, we were *really* involved in . . ."

"Randy, dear," Regina interrupted. "Voddie Ville wasn't killed by Medusa, Passion Flowers, or Dorian Studd, killed her when she walked into the wrong room and discovered she was a he. Just as Dirty Dick was killed because he insisted on her, Ham, dancing topless and Pop was killed for pawing at her until he stumbled on . . . the truth."

"Okay. So there were a few other murderers in the caper," Randy shrugged. "Pauna DeSilva was a little mushaga with a machine gun but I still say it started with the murder of Fallingham!"

"Murder?" the Blue Queen frowned. "*What* murder, Randy? Didn't you hear that nice lieutenant Pao DePussa tell us it was heart failure?"

"Heart failure? You mean, the guy just *died?* Like that?"

"Why not? It happens every day."

"But *why*, out of all the places a British secret agent could have picked to die," frowned Randy Kidd, "did he have to go and die in the Blue Queen's lap?"

"And again I say, why *not?*" shrugged Regina. "After all, *everybody's* got to die *someplace*."

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